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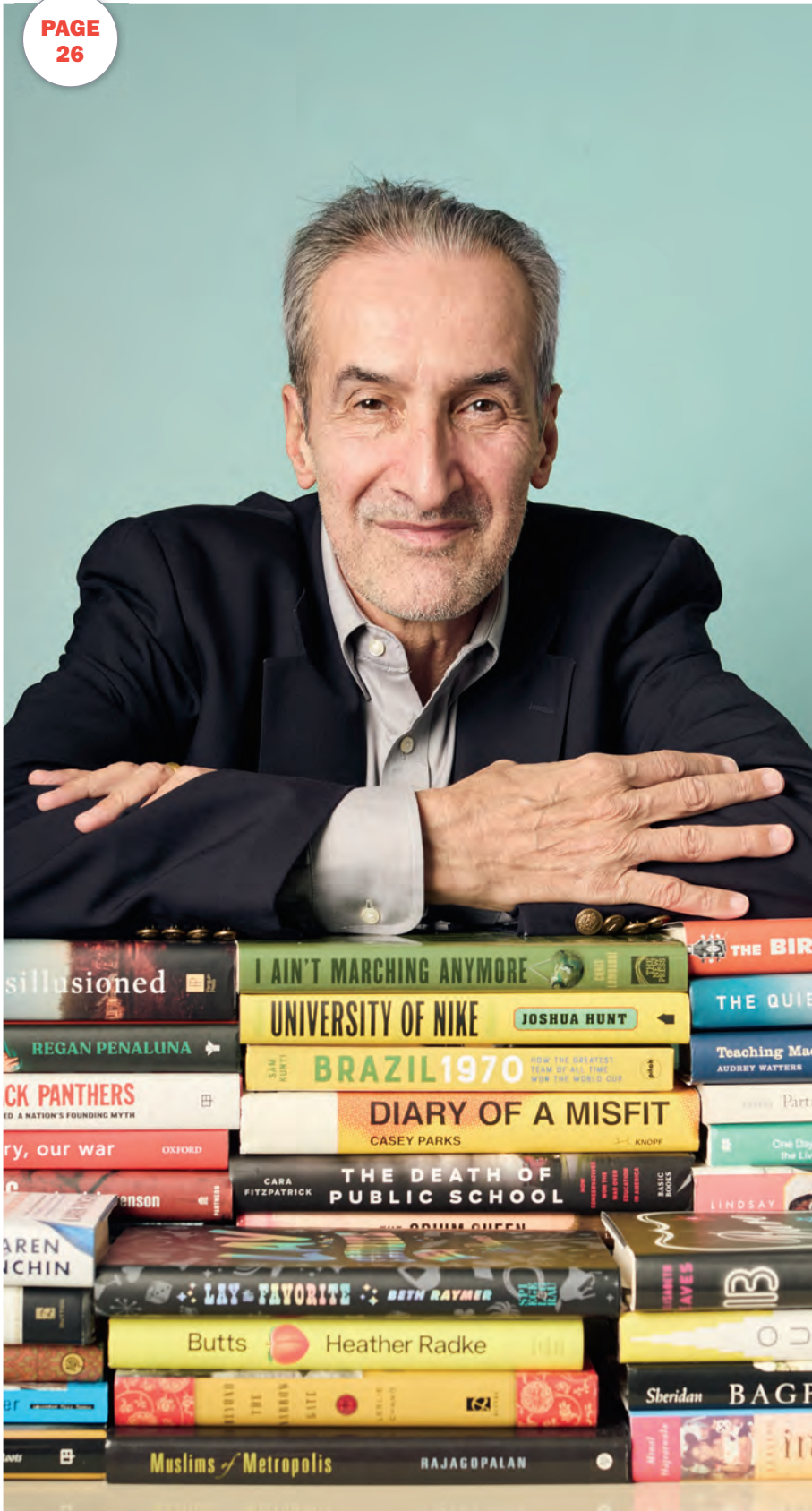
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FRANKIE ALDUINO

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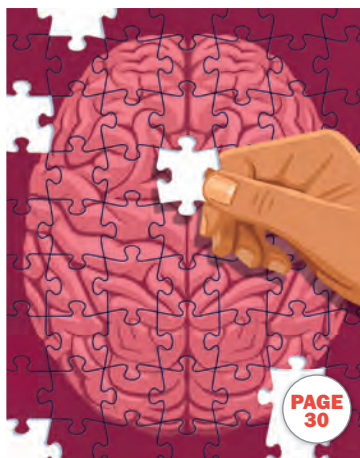
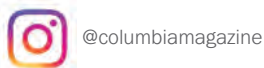
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—Milagro Ruiz Lansing '84GS
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—Keville Frederickson Tomasson '64NRS, '74TC
1754 Society member

the future is inspired.

“I hope for the better. I think we all do, but I think most Columbia graduates go out into the world hoping to improve it.”

—Carlos V. Cruz '88CC
1754 Society member

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TIME TO SPEAK UP

While reading the fall magazine, I was dismayed to find virtually zero reference to the recent events that shook Columbia and the country in the way of antisemitic rioting. All that I saw was, in your story introducing interim president Katrina Armstrong, the phrase “months of campus tensions related to the Israel–Hamas war.” I think more can and should be said on the matter.

William Herman '60SEAS
White Plains, NY

I received the nicely produced Fall 2024 issue of *Columbia Magazine* and was hugely disappointed that there was nothing in the publication addressing the unrest and difficulties at Columbia. Please include articles in the next edition educating us about the battle between clear access to buildings and classes, while allowing all students to feel safe on campus, and the right to protest. Ignoring

the reality of Columbia’s challenges fails to serve the alumni community in a beneficial way.

Mark Goldstein '86CC
Thousand Oaks, CA

FLOOD RISK

Thank you for your article about climate migration (“In Search of Safer Ground,” Fall 2024). Although I currently live in Yonkers, I grew up in the Rockaways. Our home was part of a development built in the late 1940s, probably to attract recently returned servicemen from the Second World War. None of the houses had basements. I quickly found out why when, as a little boy, I dug a hole in the backyard and hit salt water about twelve inches down. All the houses had been built on marshland.

I happened to be in the area shortly after Hurricane Sandy to attend the funeral of one of my high-school classmates and decided to swing by our old house. I was surprised to see that every single house in the

neighborhood had a dumpster in front and a pile of ruined furniture nearby. All of a sudden, it dawned on me that everyone’s first floor had flooded. There were lots of hurricanes in the fifties, and although water from the nearby creek often came in to the backyard, it never reached the inside of the house.

Alan C. Brown '68GS, '75GSAS
Yonkers, NY

A TAXING PROBLEM

Michael Graetz has my respect as a leading academic at both my alma maters, the University of Southern California and Columbia University, and for his service under George H. W. Bush. But in his interview with Lorraine Glennon (“Are Tax Breaks Breaking the Country?,” *The Big Idea*, Fall 2024), he unfairly maligns the “anti-tax” movement, reducing its origins to divisive racial, religious, and social motivations, relying on class

3 WEB STORIES YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED



Finding New Solutions for Political Polarization



8 Eye-Opening Investigative Journalism Books to Add to Your Reading List



A Cultural Guide to Satanism, Psychopaths, and the Real American Horror Story

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FEEDBACK

warfare and ad hominem critique. Graetz neglects to acknowledge that tax cuts can drive economic growth and lower unemployment and compensate investors and entrepreneurs for risk. He overlooks that top taxpayers are already paying effective rates similar to

and perhaps I'll also read Graetz's book in the near future — I might consider writing a piece entitled “The Power to Destroy: How Overspending Hijacked America.”

Arthur Corvo '78SEAS, '14TC
Oceanside, NY

I've ever had. My sixteen-year-old brother had died two years previously, and the thought of handling a dead body filled me with dread. Before we entered the lab, our professor reminded us that what we were about to see was like a building — with supporting

the individual who gave us the opportunity for such hands-on learning.

Anne Dearstyne Ketchen '74VPS
Carlisle, MA

THOUGHTS ON TECHNOLOGY

Your Backstory about Herman Hollerith (“Packing a Punch,” Fall 2024) occasions celebration of Columbia's sponsorship of and involvement in computing, but it also requires us to recognize that not all technological innovation is positive. Your article celebrates Hollerith's invention of punch-card-based statistics used for census and later election data. Both were significant contributors to efficiency and accuracy.

We must also wonder what Hollerith and ethical thinkers would have made of the use of his keypunch machines by the Nazis to catalog and segregate Jews, Roma, and Sinti in Germany and in other Nazi-occupied countries. It is clear that the data produced by Dehomag, the Deutsche Hollerith-Maschinen



those in the postwar era. While I agree with Graetz that the interest on our national debt is a hidden tax and that we ought to disavow Keynesian borrowing, he further fails to acknowledge the bipartisan responsibility to reduce spending while concurrently reducing the size of government.

Giuseppe H. Robalino-Constante '24SPS
Los Angeles, CA

Your recent interview with Michael Graetz regarding his new book, *The Power to Destroy: How the Anti-tax Movement Hijacked America*, puzzled me. Not one question was asked about overspending! After reading this interview —

A GIFT TO SCIENCE

I read with great interest Paul Hond's story about Columbia's Anatomical Donor Program (“Body of Knowledge,” College Walk, Fall 2024). The anatomy lab I took as part of my master's in occupational therapy was the best class

walls, electrical wires, and plumbing — and we were to remember that no one was living there anymore. Those words freed me from my dread, and I was able to fully engage in the lab work not only with great curiosity but also with respect and gratitude for

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

CODE	SCHOOL	CODE	SCHOOL
BC	Barnard College	LS	School of Library Service
BUS	Graduate School of Business	NRS	School of Nursing
CC	Columbia College	OPT	School of Optometry
CS	Climate School	PH	Mailman School of Public Health
DM	College of Dental Medicine	PHRM	College of Pharmaceutical Sciences
GS	School of General Studies	SEAS	Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science
GSAPP	Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation	SIPA	School of International and Public Affairs
GSAS	Graduate School of Arts and Sciences	SOA	School of the Arts
HON	(Honorary degree)	SPS	School of Professional Studies
JRN	Graduate School of Journalism	SW	School of Social Work
JTS	Jewish Theological Seminary	TC	Teachers College
KC	King's College	UTS	Union Theological Seminary
LAW	School of Law	VPS	Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons



AWARDS SEASON



This past fall, *Columbia Magazine* won Folio's prestigious **Eddie Award for best university magazine**. The Council for Advancement and Support of Education also honored the magazine with a **CASE Award** for a 2023 profile by Paul Hond of composer and musician Tyshawn Sorey '17GSAS.

Gesellschaft (German Hollerith Machine Company) was used to capture data on their residences and ages. Later, Dehomag cards were used by German railways to transport prisoners to concentration and death camps. As Einstein, Oppenheimer, Teller, and other innovators have found, creative breakthroughs can be misused. Certainly, the present-day debate about artificial intelligence is a recognition of that fact.

Lowell Williams '71SIPA, '72LAW
Scarsdale, NY

I very much enjoyed reading "Packing a Punch" in the fall issue and thought you might appreciate my intersection with Columbia computing history.

I had two summer jobs at the Columbia location of the IBM Research Division starting the summer of 1959, between high school and Princeton University. Mainly I filled in for staff who were on summer holiday. The most fun was two weeks operating the telephone switchboard and learning to program the IBM 650 computer that Wallace Eckert, director of Columbia's Thomas J. Watson Astronomical Computing Bureau, was using almost as his personal computer!

I came back to Columbia for the 1964–65 school year, earning an MS in electrical engineering, and have been very fortunate to be a part of computer history since then, mainly through my forty-plus years at IBM, where I was on the forefront of international digital communications, including time as CIO of IBM Latin America. I still teach in a couple of graduate programs, mainly sharing project-management experience,

and I daresay that I included some early-stage AI ideas in a paper I wrote for the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in April 1969 titled, "The Telephone as a Computer Input–Output Terminal for Medical Information."

Michael Otten '65SEAS
Scarsdale, NY



A Hollerith machine.

PROFESSIONAL OPINION

I salute you and your staff for issue after issue of fantastic quality. For over two years now I've held on to each issue to read and reread. Top, top quality. I'm a 1971 business-school graduate and have never contributed, but now I will become a regular contributor.

Bill Barton '71BUS
Brooklin, ME

**QUESTIONS?
COMMENTS?**

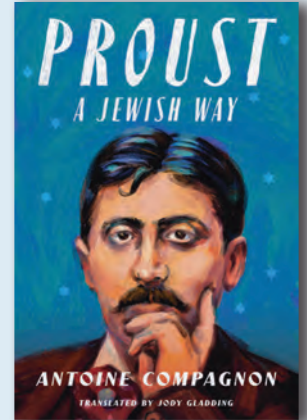
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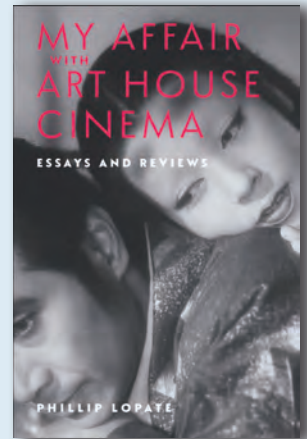


CELEBRATE NEW FACULTY BOOKS



"The story, which takes us from the 1920s to World War II, is fascinating, troubling and haunted by a discreet, difficult hope of understanding. A masterpiece of historical re-creation."

—Michael Wood, Princeton University



"My Affair with Art House Cinema is a dynamic book, encouraging the reader to seek out unseen cinematic 'truffles' and to revisit and reappraise familiar territory."

—*Times Literary Supplement*



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COLLEGE WALK

NOTES FROM
116TH STREET
AND BEYOND



A Healer at the Helm

For interim president Katrina Armstrong, education is the best medicine

At the Columbia Alumni Leaders Experience luncheon, recently held under the vault of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Columbia's interim president, Katrina Armstrong, who is also dean of the Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons and CEO of Columbia University Irving Medical Center, sat down with University Trustees co-chair David Greenwald '83LAW for a conversation about Columbia's future. Speaking before an audience of some three hundred alumni leaders, faculty, students, and staff, the interim president struck a tone of good-humored informality. When Greenwald observed that "it's not a bad thing having a physician leading the organization," Armstrong turned to the crowd and quipped, "People say this just because they want me to write them prescriptions." She then went on to display all the seriousness and empathy of a seasoned medical leader who, before coming to Columbia in 2022, was chair of

the Department of Medicine at Harvard and chief physician at Massachusetts General Hospital, where on April 15, 2013 — her first day on the job — she helped coordinate the hospital's treatment of thirty-nine patients wounded in the Boston Marathon bombing.

Armstrong earned a BA in architecture from Yale and an MD from Johns Hopkins and spent decades conducting research on cancer genomics and health-care disparities. In August, when Minouche Shafik resigned the Columbia presidency, the Trustees asked Armstrong to step into the breach. She embraced the role vigorously, driven by a love for the institution, a love of learning, and a love, above all, for the students: "They are the force, they are the heart, they are the soul, they are the energy," she said.

Addressing ongoing issues that arose from the protests of 2023–24, Armstrong called for "a campus environment that is dedicated to open inquiry, to inclusion, to pluralism, to

freedom of expression,” but one that also “rejects behaviors that prevent members of our community from learning, working, and thriving.” She emphasized the importance of hearing and understanding people — “what they’re feeling, what they’re carrying with them that day.” As a doctor, she said, you must learn how to listen and connect, must “continually look at everything you’re doing to ask, Is it in the best interest of that patient? Am I actually doing everything I can for that person sitting with me in an exam room?”

For Armstrong, the most effective remedy for many of the world’s ills is education, which she views as the foundation of a healthy society. “I just can’t imagine anything more important than the education that we offer, and I cannot imagine a university more

important to the world than Columbia,” she said, noting the University’s special relationship with New York City, a global center of commerce, culture, and technology. Columbians, she said, “are recognizing that Columbia means so much to them, and that our collective action, our collective identity, is absolutely critical for us moving forward.”

Armstrong wondered a lot about that identity when she became interim president. She talked to people on campus and off, asking: what is Columbia? “I know that sounds like kind of a funny question, but what *is* Columbia?” she said. “And the universal message I got is that Columbia is this living, really dynamic thing that is created mostly, to be honest, by our alumni.” She then addressed the alumni leaders in the room, who represented the more

than four hundred thousand Columbia graduates worldwide: “It’s truly because of you that we are Columbia.”

When Armstrong was done, a group of students — fifteen smiling members of the Notes and Keys, Columbia’s “oldest and finest co-ed a cappella group” — assembled beneath the echoing dome of the vast stone cathedral. The room fell silent, and sophomore Chelsea Chiu lifted her voice, singing the words *Everybody needs a change* — a line from Stevie Wonder’s “Don’t You Worry ’bout a Thing.”

The other voices entered, angelic, soulful, providing lush, delicate harmonies and rhythms; and in that moment, hope seemed to emanate from the students themselves, telling the community, through the medium of song, that Columbia was going to be all right.



Pillars of Strength

This issue’s cover art celebrates the Van Amringe Quadrangle and Memorial, located between Hamilton and John Jay Halls. The structure honors mathematics professor John Howard Van Amringe 1860CC, 1890HON, the first dean of Columbia College. A much beloved figure, Van Amringe enjoyed a fifty-year career at Columbia, and upon his death in 1915, alumni started a campaign to build the memorial. The site, dedicated on Commencement Day 1918, has been a popular gathering place ever since.



At top, a postcard sent in 1933; above, graduating seniors of the College’s first coed class in 1987; at right, a student-orientation picnic in 2001.





This Is Your Teenager's Brain

Scholars peer into the plugged-in adolescent mind

If you're reading this, you've probably survived adolescence, and looking back on those years you might wonder: how? At a recent Stavros Niarchos Foundation Brain Insight Lecture, sponsored by the Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute, two scholars — BJ Casey, a cognitive neuroscientist at Barnard, and Ioana Literat, an Internet researcher at Teachers College — helped answer that question by casting light on the fevered minds of today's teenagers.

Casey, who has a son in his twenties, did a little myth-busting, reminding her listeners that adolescence isn't all angst and anger. "It is just a remarkable, wonderful time of learning and discovery," she said. "It's a time in which we begin to gain a sense of who we are and who we aspire to be."

Sure, teens are known for impulsiveness, risk-taking, and poor decision-making, but Casey rejected the notion, held in some child-psychology circles, that these things

constitute a "deficit." "I think the adolescent brain has really gotten a bad rap," she said, adding that we don't refer to a newborn's inability to talk as a *deficit*; rather, we speak of the *development* of the infant's brain — which is precisely what is happening to the brains of teenagers.

To illustrate this, Casey shared functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans of adolescent brains. In children, she said, the visual and motor cortices, which enable us to see and move, are the most developed, while the prefrontal cortex, which governs decision-making, takes more time to mature. Meanwhile, the brain's emotional centers — the hypothalamus (desire), the amygdala (fear and rage), and the nucleus accumbens (the reward center, also associated with addiction and risk-taking) — kick into overdrive during adolescence. This developmental lag between emotions and control can leave teens vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

In her lab studies, Casey monitors the brain activity of teenagers as they press buttons in response to cues. She's found that teens display not only a heightened sensitivity to the opinions and attitudes of their peers but also — good news for worried parents — an inflated awareness of potential threats. And unlike adults, they remain hyperalert for those threats even after they pass.

Why, Casey asked, might the adolescent brain be programmed this way? "Peer acceptance can facilitate independent exploration and learning from the social environment," she said. And the sensitivity to threats is logical too: "If you're out there exploring new environments without the protection of the caregiver, that is going to require you to be very vigilant."

But what if that environment is contained on the screen of a laptop or a phone?

Literat studies the online political behavior of young people. She is particularly interested in what she calls

the “political sandbox” of social media — Instagram, TikTok, et al. — and how adolescents express themselves there.

Though Literat’s subjects are too young to vote, they are hardly disconnected from the political process: “They are finding their own way toward politics in the [online] spaces where they hang out, in the spaces where they feel comfortable,” she said. It’s the form of expression that’s striking. “The dominant ideal of political expression is serious, focused on fact and rationality, and detached and objective,” said Literat. But youth political expression is often the antithesis of those things: “It’s humorous. It’s emotional. It’s not rational.” Nor is it objective: “It’s all filtered through young people’s identities, through the personal implications that politics might have on themselves, on their loved ones, on their social groups,” Literat said. “And we shouldn’t think of this as narcissistic. Politics is personal, and they should be encouraged and supported in thinking of politics as personal — that’s the way to really reach them.”

Literat advised adults to listen to the voices of young people in their preferred modes and also to consider social media “as a really important, potentially even productive, part of young people’s political socialization, which is the process by which they become citizens.” Accepting the likelihood that social media isn’t going anywhere, Literat urged parents and teachers to learn more about social media, to get a better idea of what the kids are up to.

Which is not to say that the grown-ups should exert more control over teenagers’ lives. As Casey argued, teens must be allowed to screw up. “It is important that they learn from their experiences, and too often in the interest of trying to protect young people, we don’t let them fail,” she said. “We don’t let them explore, because we’re concerned for them, but by doing that, we’re actually delaying their development.” — *Paul Hond*

Mainstream Media Gets Full-Court Press

Grading the coverage of the 2024 election



Not long after voters elected Donald Trump as the forty-seventh president of the United States, three journalists and a statistician got together in Low Rotunda for some sober analysis. Hosted by SIPA’s Institute of Global Politics, the Office of the President, and Columbia Journalism School, the talk examined the news media’s performance in covering the 2024 campaign.

Sewell Chan, executive editor of *Columbia Journalism Review*, moderated a panel that featured Andrew Gelman, a professor of statistics and political science; Garrett Haake, a senior Capitol Hill correspondent for NBC News and MSNBC; and Errin Haines, the editor-at-large of the independent news website The 19th. Chan, acknowledging that we are in “a very significant time in the life of our country and our democracy,” posed a question: how did the mainstream press do?

While no major news organization was guilty of denying oxygen to candidate Trump, the panelists focused more on the media’s deficits than its excesses. Haines found that some in the mainstream press brought two preconceived narratives to their reporting: the assumption that abortion would be a decisive boon for the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris

and the even bigger assumption that, given all that was known about Trump, including a criminal conviction, dozens of criminal charges, and a civil adjudication of sexual assault, “the American people couldn’t possibly make this choice again.” Yet for many voters, the price of groceries carried the day. That reporters heard these economic cries but still held to their storylines revealed, said Haines, a “dissonance between the press’s perspective and the electorate’s perspective.”

The panelists also discussed, among other topics, the legacy of the pandemic as a factor in economic hardship and the modern glut of polls and pollsters and dubious polling methodologies. (“I think we can all agree that there are too many polls,” said Gelman. “It’s ludicrous.”) Then, of course, there was the elephant in the room: the explosion of alternative information sources, from X to Truth Social to podcasts, which have supplanted traditional media for millions of people and can be sources of mis- and disinformation. This raised questions for Haake and the old guard he represents: “How do we get people who’ve given up on mainstream media back in the tent? How do we regain our credibility?”

When asked by an audience member about the charge that

the traditional media’s liberal bias prevented it from probing President Biden’s health *before* his disastrous debate with Trump on June 27, leaving Democrats with less time to replace him, Haake said it was “a worthy criticism” and that signs of Biden’s decline had been there for years. He confessed that after attending his first Biden event of the 2020 campaign season, “I walked away thinking there was no way this guy could win an election.” Then, after Biden became president, said Haake, the White House kept him largely out of view — “bubble-wrapped,” Haake said — making it hard to report on his condition.

Haines added that the press also failed to hold Biden to account when, after he had previously signaled that he would likely be a one-term transitional president, he announced his campaign for reelection. “We didn’t have that conversation either,” Haines said.

For Haake, the task ahead is to cover the Trump presidency fairly and honestly, and he described having a sense of responsibility toward his viewers, some of whom voted for Trump. “He made promises to them, and now it’s my job to hold him accountable for the promises he made to my audience,” Haake said. “Coverage of any politician should be oppositional — oppositional, but not ideological. I think that’s a very fine line to walk, but that’s the goal.”

— Paul Hond



Trujillo competes at the 2024 World Karate Federation world championships.

Electric Kicks

Karate champ Miriam Trujillo strikes gold, creates sparks

Miriam Trujillo heard shouts in the next room. She was four years old, stuck in an after-school ballet class in Caracas, Venezuela, and she hated it. The teacher made her do splits, which hurt. But the kids on the other side of the wall seemed to be having fun. *Kiai!* they shouted. *Kiai!*

When the teacher wasn’t looking, Trujillo sneaked out and peered into the next room. The girls and boys there weren’t doing splits. They were kicking and punching. Magnetized, Trujillo joined in. This was her introduction to karate, a martial art that originated in the 1300s in the Okinawa Islands, became popular in Japan in the early twentieth century, and spread around the globe. Karate promotes mind-body harmony, respect, self-control, and nonaggression (the basic principle is never to strike first), and Trujillo was hooked. Today, Trujillo, a Columbia sophomore, is one of the top-ranked practitioners in the world.

“Karate has taught me more than I ever imagined: discipline, how to stay

consistent, and how to keep myself in check,” she says.

Cheerful, modest, and poised, Trujillo virtually hums with energy and light. She studies electrical engineering at the School of Engineering and Applied Science, is an RA in her dorm, belongs to the Columbia Formula Racing team (she’s helping to build an electric car), and is president of the SEAS Class of 2027.

There are two modes of competitive karate, she explains: kata and kumite. Kata is a set of memorized moves and is judged on technique. Kumite is sparring and is point-based: punches to the face or stomach are one point, kicks to the body are two points, kicks to the head are three points. Trujillo does kumite. It’s not full-contact — just enough to score — but collisions happen. Trujillo has had her nose broken more than once. “It’s part of the sport,” she says. “And it’s definitely made me stronger.”

Last summer, Trujillo fought in the USA Karate-do Federation national championship, held in Lafayette,

Louisiana. Competing in the under-twenty-one bracket, Trujillo kicked and punched her way to a gold medal. It was her third gold at the nationals (she also won in 2022 and 2023). In August she represented the US at the junior Pan-American championship in São Paulo, Brazil. Karate is huge in South America, and it showed: “The competition in the Pan-Americans is next-level,” Trujillo says. In that powerhouse field, Trujillo finished second.

Days later, Trujillo was at Columbia, in her circuit-analysis class, learning about resistors, capacitors, and inductors. That’s when she got a text from a friend: the latest World Karate Federation (WKF) rankings were out, and Trujillo was number nine. She had cracked the top ten! Then she saw all the other messages of congratulations. “I was the last to find out,” she says.

Trujillo is rarely last at anything, but she has certainly had to play catch-up. When she was eight, her family immigrated to the US, to Miami. She had to find a new dojo (place of karate practice) and a new sensei (teacher). She also had to learn a new language. English was hard, but math and science flowed to her. Her drive in the classroom was matched by her dedication after school on the mat. At sixteen, Trujillo became a black belt — what she calls “a super monumental moment.”



Soon she was preparing for college. Her passion was robotics, and she dreamed of building prosthetics. She got in to Columbia, and her parents were able to rest easier knowing that their only child, alone in New York City, possessed a useful skill set. “If there’s a physical altercation, I know I can defend myself,” Trujillo says.

This past October, she traveled to Venice for the WKF world championships. Her first opponent was from France, and Trujillo fought her to a tie. That meant the four judges had

to vote on the winner. But their vote was split, which left the decision to the referee — who gave it to Trujillo’s rival. Naturally, Trujillo was disappointed, but karate has also taught her how to get up from the mat. “When you’re a kid, you see every loss as a failure,”

she says. “But as you get older, you realize that rather than a setback, a loss is just getting you a step closer to reaching your next goal.”

Trujillo turns twenty-one in June and will try out for the senior US team. She hopes to make the senior Pan-Americans in May, in Mexico. Meanwhile, she’s got a full course load, and she has to build that electric car (she’s working on the wiring). Whether it’s karate kicks or kilowatts, the same current runs through everything that Trujillo does. Call it the spark of life.

— Paul Hond

THE SHORT LIST



LISTEN

Miller Theatre continues its annual **jazz series** with a performance by the Billy Childs Quartet on February 8.

Alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa then takes the stage with his acclaimed trio on March 1. millertheatre.com

SEE

The Wallach Art Gallery will showcase an exhibition of works by **Rubén Ortiz Torres**, a Los Angeles-based Mexican-American artist known for his eclectic, postmodern multimedia collaborations. January 31–March 16. wallach.columbia.edu

MOVE

Alumni and affiliates can stay in shape at the **Dodge Fitness Center**, a full-service campus gym with workout machines, classes, personal training, ball courts, a running track, and an Olympic-sized pool. Annual memberships for alumni start at \$383. percec.columbia.edu

SHOP

You don’t need to be on campus to buy Columbia-branded gear. Visit the online “spirit shop” for sweatshirts, mugs, and more. [columbia.spirit.bncollege.com](http://spirit.bncollege.com)



READ

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OFF THE **STREETS**

HOMELESSNESS IS ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX, ENTRENCHED, AND **INTRACTABLE SOCIAL PROBLEMS**. OR IS IT? **ROSANNE HAGGERTY '89GSAPP** WANTS US TO TAKE A **CLOSER LOOK** **BY DAVID J. CRAIG**

On a misty morning this past June, Denver mayor Mike Johnston stood before a small crowd in his city's bustling downtown business district and made a surprise announcement. Despite Denver's mounting homelessness crisis — on any given night some 1,300 people could be found sleeping in boxes, tents, and vehicles — the city was on the cusp of solving the issue for one key group: military veterans. Nearly one hundred veterans a night had been sleeping on the streets a year earlier, but by the start of summer that number was down to fifty-two. Johnston pledged that by year's end, none would be without a place to stay.

"We will announce today a plan to make Denver the largest American city ever to reach 'functional zero' for veterans' homelessness," Johnston said, evoking a term favored by policy wonks to describe a city's ability to move people into new housing as swiftly as they appear on the street. He said the strategy would be driven by aggressive street outreach, the construction of tiny homes on public land, and the provision of health care, substance-abuse counseling, and job-training services for people seeking shelter. Veterans would be the initial focus, out of respect for their sacrifices, Johnston emphasized, but the effort would soon be expanded to other homeless Denverites. "This is just the first step," he said.

Local residents, having grown weary of the sight of tent encampments and concerned about threats to public safety — including open drug use, unattended fires, and occasional confrontations between campers and passersby — responded to the news with a mixture of relief and incredulity. On social media many wondered aloud: Do these people even *want* homes? Shouldn't they get their lives in order first? How can the city possibly afford to house them all?

Yet Johnston's plan, for all its ambition, was firmly grounded in the latest social-science research. Experts listening to his press conference might have

is helping cities break down bureaucratic barriers that impede their progress. Yet another is finding novel ways to finance affordable-housing projects. In Denver, Haggerty's organization has been working on all of these fronts for years.

"Denver is an interesting case, because they have a significant issue with homelessness, and yet the city's leaders, rather than merely attempting to manage the situation with stopgap measures, are actually trying to solve it," says Haggerty, a sixty-four-year-old with sharp blue eyes and a calm, easygoing confidence. "That's unusual for a large city — and extremely exciting."



A formerly homeless Denverite relaxes in his tiny-home community this past summer.

thought they had stumbled upon a graduate lecture in how to shelter people humanely and cost-effectively. They also would have detected, in the details of his plan, the unmistakable influence of Rosanne Haggerty '89GSAPP, the founding president and chief executive officer of the New York-based nonprofit Community Solutions. A national leader in the fight against homelessness, Haggerty is known for crafting ambitious, data-driven initiatives that have dramatically reduced homelessness in dozens of US cities. One of her signature strategies is implementing sophisticated analytic systems that enable officials to monitor the size of their homeless populations in real time and respond in kind. Another

"Solve" is a word that comes up frequently when speaking with Haggerty. She's been trying to insert it into the national conversation on homelessness since the 1990s, when, fresh on the heels of earning a master's degree in real-estate development from Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, she founded her first nonprofit and began converting rundown New York City buildings into sleek new residences for people living on the streets. It wasn't easy then, and it's not easy now, she says, to persuade anyone that ending homelessness is an attainable goal.

"We tend to view homelessness as this overwhelmingly complex, intractable social problem that we just have

to deal with," says Haggerty, a past recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant. "But that's not true. And the notion that combating homelessness is futile is a big part of the challenge we're confronting now."

Here's another challenge: countering the myth that homeless people have opted out of society and are either uninterested in or incapable of living in a home. "The vast majority of people experiencing homelessness, including those who've been on the streets for long periods of time, desperately want homes," says Haggerty. "The problem is that the systems that are supposed to be helping them are failing."

The scale of homelessness in the US today is staggering. There are currently 650,000 Americans experiencing homelessness — a number that has increased sharply over the past decade — and on average people are staying homeless for longer. The problem is endemic to nearly every US city, as well as to many suburbs. The main drivers of the crisis are clear enough: government investments in affordable housing have fallen short, and elected officials in many suburban areas, from Westchester to Santa Monica, have enacted zoning regulations that make it more difficult to construct apartment complexes or multifamily dwellings. This is squeezing the rental market in and around cities, creating unprecedented housing insecurity for low-income people. One recent study found that nearly a quarter of all US renters spend more than half their income on rent and utilities.

It is worth noting that most people experiencing homelessness are going through a temporary rough patch and will find a new place to live within a few months, often with the help of rental subsidies. But about one-quarter are chronically homeless as defined by the federal government, meaning they have been on the streets for over a year and are affected by a disabling condition like a mental illness or substance-use disorder. The chronically homeless tend to be older, male, and from disadvantaged backgrounds; people of color, military

veterans, and survivors of childhood abuse and trauma are disproportionately represented among them. Helping these individuals regain stable housing can be difficult and expensive. Many will require heavily subsidized housing, along with on-site social support, for the rest of their lives. But one of Haggerty's greatest achievements has been to help demonstrate that cities can rehouse large numbers of chronically homeless people without breaking their budgets. "Cost studies have shown time and time again that communities can actually save money on balance by addressing chronic homelessness rather than ignoring it," she says. "Cities are already spending enormous amounts of money *not* solving the problem, in part because people on the street require lots of emergency medical care and often get ensnared in the criminal-justice system. The costs are spread all over the place, so we don't notice them."

Haggerty and her colleagues at Community Solutions are working with officials in Denver and many other cities to help them redesign their housing systems and social services. Yet Haggerty's vision extends far beyond these committed allies. She hopes that success in places like Denver will inspire a transformative national approach by showing other cities that homelessness can be reduced with smart, compassionate solutions grounded in data analytics. Too often, she observes, municipal agencies fall into fatalism and complacency, overwhelmed by the scale of the problem and misled by outdated perceptions that homeless people are beyond help. "The tone is often set by the chief executive," Haggerty says. "If your mayor thinks that homelessness is unsolvable, he or she may try to hide the problem by harassing people out of town with police sweeps or sticking everyone in shelters rather than actually housing them. And that sense of resignation can then flow down the command chain."

To date, Haggerty has developed more than five thousand affordable-housing units through Community Solutions and her first nonprofit, Common Ground.

She has also guided local governments in rehousing more than one hundred thousand people experiencing chronic homelessness. But her organization's latest initiative, Built for Zero, is its most ambitious yet, helping 140 US cities work toward ending homelessness altogether. So far, nineteen of these cities have ended homelessness among certain subgroups of their unhoused populations, like the chronically homeless or veterans. While many of these successes have come in small cities — places like Hackensack, New Jersey; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Bakersfield, California; and Rockford, Illinois — Haggerty's ambitions extend to larger, more challenging urban areas.

THERE ARE CURRENTLY 650,000 AMERICANS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS — A NUMBER THAT HAS INCREASED SHARPLY OVER THE PAST DECADE.

"There's no reason why our approach can't be scaled up to New York, LA, Chicago, or any other big metropolis," Haggerty says. But to prove it, she and her colleagues are first going to demonstrate that their strategy works in places like Denver, San Diego, Nashville, and Sacramento.

The term "homelessness" was first used in the United States in the 1870s to describe people who traveled the country looking for work. A century later, a more insidious and pervasive iteration emerged. In 1970s New York City, throngs of men and women began appearing slumped in doorways, panhandling on subways, and curled up on steam vents — scenes of mass destitution that had rarely been witnessed in America since the Great Depression. Widely perceived as a stark symbol of Gotham's moral decay, the sprawled-out bodies obstructing sidewalks elicited panicked pleas for "cleanups" and arrests. The police regularly obliged.

Public attitudes toward the city's homeless population began to soften

only slightly with the 1981 publication of *Private Lives / Public Spaces*, a landmark work of guerrilla ethnography by then Columbia graduate students Ellen Baxter '81PH and Kim Hopper '75GSAS, '87PH. Baxter and Hopper spent almost two years huddled up alongside dozens of homeless people in New York City shelters, parks, and bus depots, and the resulting interviews gave readers their first intimate glimpse into the lives of the dispossessed. Baxter and Hopper's research revealed that large numbers of street dwellers were former psychiatric patients who had been released into the community after the state, in a frenzy of budget cutting, shuttered several local mental hospitals. Many others had

previously lived in flophouses, tenement hotels, and single-room-occupancy buildings that had been torn down to make way for luxury hotels, condominiums, and office towers. Some had jobs — as dishwashers, housekeepers, messengers, and factory workers — but could no longer manage to afford an apartment in the rapidly gentrifying city. Of course, there were idlers, drunks, addicts, and swindlers among them. In a city where thousands of people wound up on the street, any number of paths might lead there. But only systematic economic and policy failures, Baxter and Hopper suggested, were likely to explain the new trend.

The release of *Private Lives / Public Spaces* inspired scores of journalists, activists, and progressive politicians to push for more humane treatment of the homeless. It also helped give rise to the modern interdisciplinary field of homelessness studies, which for the next two decades was anchored at Columbia University. In the 1980s, Columbia urban-planning scholar Peter Marcuse '62GSAS revealed how segregation, gentrification, and underinvestment in

low-income neighborhoods contributed to homelessness. Columbia economist Brendan O’Flaherty then did seminal work linking affordable-housing shortages, rent increases, and wage stagnation to rising homelessness rates. Their urban-planning colleague Elliott D. Sclar gave the field one of its most enduring metaphors, likening a tight rental market to a game of musical chairs at a child’s birthday party. Hopper, who went on to become a Columbia law and public-health professor, continued to study the daily lives of homeless

how they’d ever leave the streets, and we didn’t either. After a while, nobody even talked about it.”

Determined to make a deeper impact, Haggerty soon accepted a position with Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens, working on efforts to convert underused church properties into housing for the formerly homeless. She spent the next several years learning to navigate the byzantine world of affordable-housing development, cobbling together complex funding packages while balancing the competing interests of city

“THE VAST MAJORITY OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS ... DESPERATELY WANT HOMES. THE PROBLEM IS THAT THE SYSTEMS THAT ARE SUPPOSED TO BE HELPING THEM ARE FAILING.”

people, including the extraordinary bureaucratic hurdles they face when trying to access public services, like housing assistance or legal aid.

Haggerty, who grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut, arrived in New York City fresh out of Amherst College in 1982. Captivated by the reform spirit then percolating in Greenwich Village cafés and bookstores, the earnest twenty-one-year-old took a job counseling runaway youths at a shelter in Midtown and in her free time volunteered at a shelter for homeless women. The experience would profoundly affect her, setting the course for her career. “I think because homelessness was still relatively new, I figured that we could nip it in the bud,” she says. “There were far fewer people living on the streets back then compared to today. My attitude was, ‘Come on, everybody, we can do this! Let’s find these people new homes!’”

After a few months, though, Haggerty grew disillusioned — not because the shelters’ clients seemed beyond reach but because the chaos of their lives was met by an equally disorganized, and blindly indifferent, system the city had built to assist them. “I’d come in expecting a master plan,” she remembers, “but there wasn’t one. Many of the people I met had absolutely no idea

agencies, nonprofits, and neighborhood groups wary of welcoming low-income housing into their backyards. She eventually led the transformation of three vacant schools and an orphanage into housing for 225 people.

“This work suited me,” Haggerty says. “It is satisfying to create housing, because you’re offering a tangible solution. I wanted to learn to do it at a larger scale, to serve more people.”

That led her to enroll in Columbia’s real-estate-development program, which has long emphasized socially responsible housing practices. There she honed her skills in market analysis, financial modeling, public-private partnerships, and property management. She learned from architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright the history of housing-reform movements and how residential design can foster feelings of stability, dignity, and connectedness when executed well and isolation and hopelessness when executed poorly. She drew insights from real-estate-finance expert Charles S. Laven not only on securing funds but on continuing to persevere in the face of bureaucratic obstacles. “Chuck showed me that no matter how frustrating the development process can be, you can always approach the work with a sense of fun, curiosity, and delight,” she says.

The year after she graduated, Haggerty got her first breakthrough opportunity. New York City was poised to condemn the Times Square Hotel — an infamously dilapidated, crime-ridden Beaux Arts building with fifteen stories and seven hundred units — and was entertaining redevelopment proposals. While most developers envisioned upscale apartments, Haggerty had a different plan: “I proposed a full renovation with new efficiency units, but for tenants we’d bring in some of the most vulnerable of the city’s homeless, including those with serious mental-health issues,” she recalls. To make this vision a reality, she founded her first nonprofit, Common Ground, and offered herself up as the building’s next landlord. Columbia’s Center for Urban Community Services, created in 1979 to fight homelessness in New York City, joined her proposal, agreeing to provide tenants a full range of on-site social services. (The center branched off from Columbia and became an independent organization in 1993.) “We proposed a model where tenants would sign leases and pay 30 percent of their income if they worked, supplemented by a patchwork of grants, subsidies, and tax credits we stitched together,” Haggerty says. “Tenants would be expected to follow building rules and generally be good neighbors, with a team of social workers on hand to resolve any conflicts.”

This novel housing concept — the first component of Haggerty’s own master plan — was directly inspired by Baxter, who had already demonstrated its potential by opening a handful of smaller residential facilities for chronically homeless people in Upper Manhattan. Haggerty believed that Baxter’s approach, which came to be known as permanent supportive housing, could be turned into a far-reaching solution. “Ellen’s work was the turning point, demonstrating what was possible when people are given the right support,” Haggerty says. “I wanted to figure out a way to make the model replicable in any neighborhood or city.” Among Haggerty’s innovations was the idea to set aside some apartments for tenants who would

pay market rent. “I thought that in addition to making the finances work, this would help establish a stable living environment,” she says.

Against all odds, Haggerty’s Times Square Hotel project was approved by the city and became a resounding success, with hundreds of formerly homeless people dutifully paying their rent, taking yoga and cooking classes together, and rebuilding their lives. The vast majority of them would remain stably housed in the ensuing years, with many reintegrating into the workforce. (Dozens of tenants worked on the premises, stocking soda machines, providing security, and scooping ice cream in a ground-floor Ben & Jerry’s.) Haggerty’s triumph made national headlines, offering a bold new vision for what homelessness services could be.

Over the next decade, Haggerty helped spearhead the development of similar sites in Toronto, London, and Tokyo, as well as in other US cities, establishing herself as the nation’s leading provider of permanent supportive housing. Her team used a constantly evolving model of social support that built upon Baxter’s original approach. For example, Haggerty and her colleagues at Common Ground were early adopters of a pioneering philosophy developed by psychologist Sam Tsemberis, a member of the Columbia faculty from 2007 to 2018, who advocated providing permanent housing to chronically homeless people without first requiring them to accept treatment for psychiatric or substance-abuse issues. This “Housing First” model cut against clinical orthodoxy, but Haggerty’s team provided some of the first large-scale, sustained evidence in support of the idea. “We found that people are likelier to stick with treatment if they have a stable home first,” says Haggerty, “which makes sense — how are you going to engage in serious self-care while living on the street or in a shelter?”

By the early 2000s, though, Haggerty was growing restless. She was creating affordable housing across the country, rehabbing buildings and helping community leaders develop their own supportive housing projects, yet homeless-

ness was still on the rise. This seemed to confirm for her a troubling suspicion that the crisis wasn’t only about a housing shortage; it stemmed from deeper, more elusive forces. Signs of structural breakdown were all around her — cities pouring millions into sprawling shelter systems that failed to provide pathways to permanent housing, sidewalks still crowded with homeless people in neighborhoods where her latest residences had just opened. In city after city, she observed overstretched outreach teams, agencies with muddled missions that didn’t align, and an overall lack of urgency in helping those who needed it most. “I’d often hear about housing

ing the Times Square Hotel. Through interviews with scores of local service providers and homeless people, they uncovered serious flaws. Chief among them was the discovery that New York City’s response system had evolved into an unwieldy hodgepodge of public and private programs that operated in silos, with little incentive to collectively move people into permanent housing. “Organizations with government contracts were often evaluated on narrow metrics, like how many people they temporarily sheltered or counseled,” says Haggerty. “There was little consideration of whether their efforts ultimately got people housed.” Homeless people,



Nearly 30,000 people live on the streets of Los Angeles.

vouchers going unused,” Haggerty says, “and affordable-housing units sitting vacant because of endless bureaucratic delays.” Haggerty decided that without a fundamental rethinking of how municipal governments approached homelessness, her efforts would ultimately fall short. “A lack of housing was clearly driving the crisis, but new housing alone wasn’t enough, because there was also a systemic failure to respond effectively,” she says.

To better understand the problem, Haggerty and her colleagues began to investigate how homelessness response systems functioned in their own backyard, on the streets surround-

meanwhile, expressed frustration that outreach workers frequently gave them rides to shelters, soup kitchens, or counseling centers — but rarely offered them concrete help in finding homes. “Providers were offering what they were accustomed to giving rather than listening to what people actually wanted,” Haggerty recalls. “This led to many people on the streets being wrongly labeled as ‘service-resistant’ — code for saying someone is incapable of being helped — when that often wasn’t true.”

In 2003, Haggerty persuaded a number of New York City agencies and nonprofits to join Common Ground in an ambitious experiment to try to solve,

rather than merely manage, homelessness in and around Times Square. The coalition began by mapping homelessness in a one-square-mile area, sending waves of outreach workers into the streets to get to know every homeless person by name, to build trust, and to document their histories, vulnerabilities, and needs. The organizations then worked collaboratively to guide the most vulnerable individuals — those who had lived on the streets the longest and were the least able to advocate for themselves — through the complex process of securing housing. This meant helping them obtain identification, complete psychiatric evaluations, apply for housing assistance, and prepare for landlord interviews. Sharing information between agencies proved pivotal. “Someone might qualify for a housing subsidy that only one organization knew about or have critical documents on file somewhere that no one else was aware of,” Haggerty says. The team also enlisted hospital staff, police officers, and parks workers. “If someone was treated at an emergency room for a serious illness, we wanted to make sure they were subsequently referred for housing assistance rather than being discharged back onto the street,” she explains.

The results of Haggerty’s initiative, called Street to Home, were remarkable. Between 2003 and 2008, the program nearly eradicated homelessness in its target area and contributed to a 43 percent reduction in surrounding West Midtown neighborhoods. Haggerty’s team was then invited by Los Angeles officials to help them design a similar pilot program on Skid Row, which successfully housed dozens of chronically homeless people. Soon, communities across the country were seeking Haggerty’s guidance in replicating the strategy.

Over time, a new vision emerged. “We found that cities make the most progress when they respond to homelessness as if it’s a public-health emergency,” Haggerty says. “City leaders should convene regular meetings with representatives from every agency, nonprofit, and community group that has information about the

homeless population and require real-time data sharing. They should demand to know exactly how many people are on the street and how many have been placed into permanent homes. Clear goals should be established, and programs held accountable.” For example, shelters shouldn’t be rewarded simply for filling cots, soup kitchens for serving meals, or sobriety programs for issuing certificates. “Instead,” says Haggerty, “everyone should be measured by one metric: how effectively they contribute to getting people housed and reducing homelessness. Period.”



Rosanne Haggerty meets with a colleague.

In 2011, Haggerty and several colleagues left Common Ground to establish Community Solutions, a nonprofit focused on improving the nation’s homelessness response systems. Common Ground soon rebranded as Breaking Ground and narrowed its mission to concentrate on developing and managing supportive housing in New York and Connecticut. Today, Breaking Ground continues to operate the Times Square Hotel, which remains the largest supportive-housing residence in the country.

On a Friday morning in late November, Jamie Rife, the executive director of Denver’s Department of Housing Stability, opened a laptop on her desk and

reviewed data on the city’s homeless veterans. As she scrolled, Rife zeroed in on the details for the nine veterans still out on the street, examining their progress: who had been issued a housing voucher, who had a landlord lined up, and who was just days away from move-in.

Rife, who is Mayor Johnston’s top deputy in the city’s fight against homelessness, leads a command center comprising ten agencies and organizations. It meets twice daily — once at 9 a.m. and again at 5 p.m. “Every morning we see updates on what each veteran needs next and we decide who among us can deliver that,” she says. “Then we all go away with our list of to-dos for the day.”

Rife credits much of Denver’s recent success in housing veterans to technological guidance from Community Solutions. Using a specialized data dashboard originally created by a Seattle firm to help health officials monitor disease outbreaks, Denver city agencies and nonprofits can track their efforts in real time, analyzing information on veterans’ movements in and out of homelessness and coordinating responses seamlessly. The city has also embraced procedural innovations

recommended by Haggerty’s organization, like iterative learning, in which outreach teams are constantly assessing the effectiveness of their strategies, refining their methods as they go.

“You can’t solve a problem that you don’t understand,” says Rife. “And for a long time, we didn’t understand homelessness in Denver, either in the aggregate or at the level of individuals.”

Denver is not alone in making progress on housing homeless veterans. Cities across the US have been bringing veterans off the street, supported by a major federal initiative. Since 2008, Congress has issued 110,000 housing vouchers for veterans through HUD-VASH, a joint program of the Department of Housing and Urban Development and

the Department of Veterans Affairs. This effort has halved the number of homeless veterans, even as overall homelessness has risen. Yet challenges remain, since many cities struggle to identify all veterans who qualify for the program and to place them in appropriate homes. There remains a nationwide shortage of supportive-housing units, and voucher holders looking for apartments on the open market often say landlords are unwilling to rent to them. Consequently, a quarter of all HUD-VASH vouchers go unused, and some thirty-five thousand veterans remain homeless.

Haggerty and her colleagues are working with cities to help them fully capitalize on these vital resources. They hope that as communities refine their methods and eliminate homelessness among veterans, they will build the political momentum and secure the funding necessary to end homelessness among other vulnerable groups. Some cities now partnering with Community Solutions on its Built for Zero campaign have already achieved such milestones. Abilene, Texas, a city of 125,000 in the western part of the state, has effectively eradicated both veterans' and chronic homelessness by expanding its outreach efforts — even conducting regular searches of nearby forests to find and assist people living outdoors. Bergen County, New Jersey, whose county seat is Hackensack, has accomplished the same by creating a countywide trust fund to subsidize rents for formerly homeless people and establishing a one-stop service hub where people can access housing-placement and support programs.

“One of the benefits of prioritizing veterans is their cause garners broad bipartisan support,” says Haggerty. “Once communities succeed in housing veterans, they often find it fosters a deeper sense of compassion for helping others experiencing homelessness.”

Could a major metropolitan area like Denver achieve similar results? This would be extremely challenging, since the sheer scale of homelessness in

large cities stretches resources to their limits. Federal funding falls far short of addressing the needs of everybody experiencing chronic homelessness. For example, while the HUD-VASH program provides nearly one housing voucher for every homeless veteran nationwide, the availability of federal rental assistance for homeless non-veterans is much scarcer, reaching only a small fraction of those in need. Denver, like many large US cities, has attempted to bridge the gap through investments in rental assistance and affordable

“ONCE COMMUNITIES SUCCEED IN HOUSING VETERANS, THEY OFTEN FIND IT FOSTERS A DEEPER SENSE OF COMPASSION FOR HELPING OTHERS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS.”

housing, committing \$242 million in 2024. Yet homelessness in the city continues to rise — it was up 10 percent from 2023 to 2024. Experts attribute this to decades of underinvestment in affordable housing, the rising cost of living, and an influx of wealthy professionals drawn to Denver's growing tech and finance sectors — a trend that has driven up rents and displaced lower-income residents.

This is a pattern playing out in many US cities. And while elected officials across the country are working to loosen zoning restrictions and accelerate construction, the slow pace of affordable-housing development poses a hurdle. These projects often take years to get financed and approved, so rental markets will likely remain tight for the foreseeable future, economists say.

Yet in Denver, housing advocates have reason for hope. Over the past year, the Johnston administration, working closely with Community Solutions, has demonstrated increasing ingenuity in addressing the homelessness crisis. It has launched pilot “micro-communities” — clusters of tiny homes paired with wraparound social services — and has announced plans to repurpose vacant office buildings into affordable housing. Additionally,

Community Solutions has helped to transform several old buildings in Denver into supportive housing, employing an innovative financing model conceived by Haggerty's team and a Philadelphia-based investment firm: socially conscious investors pool resources into a private-equity fund that acquires and renovates properties, which are then managed by nonprofits that lease units to homeless individuals and families. “Now you have landlords who truly understand the needs of these tenants,” explains Haggerty, emphasizing

that property conversions offer a much quicker path to expanding housing supply compared to ground-up construction.

Denver has also shown a willingness to take on entrenched interests that critics say have slowed progress in the past. The city is now sending proportionally fewer homeless people into temporary emergency shelters, some of which *The Denver Gazette*, in a recent investigative series, found had insufficiently supported people in their efforts to find new homes.

Meanwhile, Rife is exploring how advanced data analytics could prevent homelessness in the first place. “We now have a much clearer picture of the life circumstances that lead people to lose their homes,” she says. “Young people leaving foster care are particularly vulnerable, as are older adults who lose a spouse. I'm hoping that we can use this data to proactively identify and assist people in these situations, providing rental support before they end up on the street.”

Haggerty, whose optimism is unshakable, is certain this is possible. “We have the tools to keep people in their homes and to make sure that homelessness is rare and brief when it does occur,” she says. “What's needed is the collective will to use them.” 🏠

Learning from Madagascar

Fishing communities in Madagascar have survived centuries of climate tumult. What is their secret? And could it be useful in times of global warming? Columbia researchers aim to find out.

By Ashley Braun and David J. Craig

Beneath a roof festooned with bunting, schoolchildren watched saucer-eyed as three young men performed acrobatic dance moves inspired by martial arts. Older women wrapped in brightly colored skirts clustered in the back of the wooden pavilion. The crowd clapped along with the music, enthralled by the display.

Onlookers would be forgiven for thinking that this gathering in the remote fishing village of Andavadoaka, Madagascar, was a village custom or tribal ceremony passed down through the ages. But in fact this was something entirely new: a community workshop organized by Columbia social scientists hoping to bond with the Malagasy people whose culture they are studying.

The event, which took place this past summer, would prove unexpectedly fruitful. As the crowd watched and sometimes joined in with the dance, the performers' sweeping arm and leg movements reawakened their long-dormant memories of traditional dance ceremonies witnessed decades earlier. Speaking later to lead researcher Kristina Douglass, an associate professor at Columbia Climate School, the village elders described their memories in detail. They

recalled how, after attending similar ceremonies in their youth, they climbed into outrigger canoes called *lakanas* and sailed among the surrounding coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangroves, fishing for octopus, grouper, snapper, lobster, and finfish. One man described how they obeyed rules meant to ensure they did not overfish one of their favorite sources of food, the octopus. For example, if no octopuses were spotted in the water, they would resist the temptation to break apart their coral dens to retrieve them. Better to go hungry once, the elder said, than jeopardize the livelihoods of future generations. "He said that people back then were so respectful of the sea creatures, they thought of them almost as relatives," says Douglass, an archaeologist and climate scientist who studies how people have interacted with the natural environment throughout history.

Today, fishing practices in Madagascar, a Texas-sized island nation off the coast of East Africa, have evolved with the arrival of industrial fishing fleets and mining interests and the growth of its population. Fishermen and fisherwomen are routinely smashing open octopuses' dens. This causes significant damage to coral

reefs — which are also being ravaged by global warming — threatening not only the sustainability of octopus populations but the villagers' long-term subsistence.

After her conversation with the elders, Douglass wondered: might it be possible to resurrect the old rules and instill them in a younger generation? Perhaps, if combined with new government policies to protect the reefs, the readoption of traditional practices could help the octopus populations recover. Douglass, who uses they/them or she/her pronouns, made a mental note to discuss the idea further with the villagers.

That joyful gathering and the insights it inspired encapsulate much of what is unique about the Morombe Archaeological Project (MAP), which Douglass has led since 2011. Based in the Velondriake marine protected area, a region containing thirty-five Indigenous fishing, farming, foraging, and herding communities along Madagascar's southwestern coast, the initiative studies the history of the Malagasy people's stewardship practices for clues about how the communities might yet again adapt to a rapidly changing environment. Often this research involves collecting and analyzing archaeological, paleoclimatic,





Scenes from daily life in southwestern Madagascar, where Indigenous communities have long employed inventive methods to safeguard their food resources.

and biological data — to determine, say, how ancient people’s food-harvesting practices shifted in accordance with changing climatic conditions and the abundance or dearth of particular fish, animal, or plant species. But Douglass and their colleagues are also collecting oral histories to record the Malagasy people’s own knowledge of traditional sustainability practices, many of which have never been formally documented. And all of this work is done in close partnership with the Malagasy people in accordance with the principles of “coproduction,” an emerging model of fieldwork that holds that the subjects of scientific research ought to have a voice in how it is conducted and ought ultimately to benefit from it.

Douglass, who is widely recognized as a pioneer of archaeological coproduction, involves Malagasy people in decisions about nearly every aspect of MAP’s work — from the framing of research questions and methodology to the way the team’s findings are publicly disseminated. The Columbia project today employs fifteen full-time Malagasy research associates, some of whom have had limited schooling but who possess unparalleled knowledge of local history and food-production practices. In addition, community elders representing five ancestral clans in Velondriake sit on a MAP board of advisers. “Real knowledge coproduction requires that there be equal power within a team and that everybody involved have agency in shaping the direction of the work,” says Douglass. “What it looks like is hugely diverse. It doesn’t look the way we expect science to look.”

In the Malagasy language, “Velondriake” means “to live with the sea,” and the people in this region have long survived on what they catch, grow, hunt, and gather. Their lives have never been easy, as the region’s climate is notoriously unpredictable; the summer wet season may bring four inches of rain or five feet. But over thousands of years, the people of Velondriake have developed successful adaptations, including a seminomadic lifestyle that enables them to respond to the pull of a booming fishing ground

or the push of a poor tuber harvest. As Douglass noted in a 2021 paper, the intergenerational transfer of group knowledge, mainly through a form of storytelling called *tapasiry* (which loosely translates as “tales of proper conduct”), enabled local inhabitants to coax abundance out of landscapes that outsiders regarded as barren.

However, numerous global forces, from industrial fishing trawlers to anthropogenic climate change, have begun to erode those adaptive advantages. Massive foreign fishing vessels, many from Asia seeking tuna and shrimp, are sweeping up countless other marine species in their huge nets and straining Madagascar’s fisheries. The



Kristina Douglass (left) and local historian Manantsoa Kely in Madagascar’s Mikea Forest.

country’s valuable stock of sea cucumbers, a delicacy that China ravenously imports, has collapsed. Meanwhile, global warming, in addition to devastating the nation’s coral reefs, is intensifying tropical cyclones and making semiarid landscapes even drier and less fertile. “People are under tremendous pressure,” says Douglass. “There’s a lot of hunger.”

Globalization is also disrupting the transmission of ancestral knowledge. Younger villagers, drawn to social media and the temptations of TikTok videos, are often deaf to the stories of their grandparents. This has prompted

widespread concern that sustainability practices that once proved critical in coping with environmental shocks may soon disappear forever. At the request of village elders, Douglass and their colleagues are developing educational materials to teach local youths about their own community’s history and foraging traditions. Leading that effort is François Lahiniriko, who was born in Andavadoaka and now serves as a MAP assistant coordinator and a field-team manager. Before he met Douglass as a college student and joined one of their archaeological digs in 2012, Lahiniriko hadn’t deeply considered his homeland’s history. Now he is enamored with the way archaeology enlivens his surroundings — for instance, by unlocking the subtle stories in his country’s ubiquitous pottery — and is determined to share his sense of wonder with others. “Ceramic analysis is a particular thing that I love,” he says. “Each decoration can tell where that object comes from.”

Douglass’s perspective on the issues of inclusivity and coproduction was shaped by their own upbringing. Born in the West African nation of Togo, they were adopted by an American man and a Dutch-Indonesian woman who worked in international health and development. Douglass spent much of their childhood in Madagascar, surrounded by Western expats who, Douglass said, would often pontificate about how the island’s once “pristine” environment had been destroyed by human activity. In this telling, the destructive people were always the Malagasy — Black people who needed to be taught how to protect their environment, despite having survived here long before Europeans colonized it. “You see it all over the colonial and postcolonial world, similar narratives about what local and Indigenous communities do to the environment,” says Douglass, who would go on to earn a bachelor’s degree in classical archaeology at Dartmouth and a PhD in anthropology at Yale. “So that bitter seed was planted pretty early.”

While at Yale, Douglass was inspired to return to Madagascar and undertake

an in-depth investigation of the island's ecological history. Specifically, Douglass sought to determine if any archaeological evidence existed to support the popular idea that Madagascar's first human inhabitants had wiped out Madagascar's fabulous bygone megafauna — including pygmy hippopotamuses, giant elephant birds, and man-sized lemurs — shortly after having arrived from East Africa and Indonesia, ostensibly some 1,500 years ago. But Douglass didn't uncover any piles of ancient bones indicative of mass-butchered sites. That pushed the young archaeologist to launch MAP and to expand the search, but a more exhaustive survey found only limited evidence of megafauna consumption — nothing to suggest overhunting. "I thought, well, this is really interesting. Let's then focus on what everyday life was like here," says Douglass.

Douglass and colleagues went on to publish a series of studies, based on animal-fossil remains stretching back 1,400 years, that revealed that Malagasy communities developed creative means of managing natural resources — migrating frequently, diversifying their diets, and cooperating with neighboring clans to preserve fauna and flora. "It's very counter to this notion of the tragedy of the commons: that wherever people are, they will be blanket consumers of everything that exists," says Douglass.

In 2019, Douglass conducted a systematic review of radiocarbon dates from all archaeological materials ever collected in Madagascar, finding compelling evidence that humans first arrived on the island not 1,500 but rather 11,000 years ago. Additional research is still needed to determine if those initial settlers put down permanent roots and are the ancestors of today's inhabitants, but Douglass's findings raise the possibility that ancient Malagasy people coexisted with megafauna like pygmy hippopotamuses for thousands of years before the creatures died out. "It's conceivable that a wave of extinctions that occurred between 1,500 and 1,000 years ago resulted from the emergence of global trade networks and the arrival of newer

settlers who brought more modern agricultural methods, which were ecologically disruptive," says Douglass.

Columbia University took notice of Douglass's research and in 2022 appointed them an associate professor of climate, the first faculty hire for the new Columbia Climate School. Douglass now runs MAP out of the Olo Be Taloha Lab at Columbia's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, New York. (Olo Be Taloha means "elders of

"We want to help these communities share their most successful sustainability strategies."

the past" in Malagasy.) Douglass says they were drawn to the climate school because of its emphasis on finding real-world solutions to climate threats and promoting social and racial justice.

Today, MAP includes more than thirty-five research projects aimed at understanding Madagascar's settlement history and how human activity has been shaped by, and has in turn shaped, the natural environment. Some efforts are aimed at understanding how ancient Malagasy people managed specific resources, like elephant birds, whose populations they appear to have valued and protected for their eggs, as well as some 250 fish species. The MAP team is also devising innovative ways to prompt elders' recollections of past stewardship practices. For example, Douglass and their colleagues are teaching Malagasy elders to scuba dive in order to help them recall details of traditional fishing techniques. The researchers have also shot drone footage of remote landscapes where elders once worked and shown them the footage using virtual-reality headsets. "This experimental oral-history work is designed to use sensorial experiences to trigger memories," says Douglass.

Douglass's team is now undertaking one of its most ambitious projects to date: a survey of current land-use and

food-production practices in dozens of villages throughout southwestern Madagascar. The researchers hope to learn what local community members consider the most sustainable fishing, farming, and herding practices and then relay the findings to government agencies and NGOs that oversee conservation efforts there. Douglass says there is reason to suspect that environmental regulations that have been instituted in some parts of Madagascar are ineffective, and possibly even harmful, because they inadvertently constrain Indigenous people's traditional practices. For example, government regulators have banned or

strictly limited human activity in some parts of the country. Douglass says that while this modern conservation strategy makes sense in certain settings, it may not be suitable for places where Indigenous people have a long history of successfully managing and protecting the natural environment. "The movements of Malagasy communities in and out of particular grasslands, woodlands, and coastal regions are integral to how these ecosystems have evolved to function, and so restricting people's mobility may be detrimental both to them and to the ecosystems," Douglass says.

Ultimately, the Columbia team's research could have implications far beyond Madagascar. The researchers recently started similar studies in Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African nations, and they hope to eventually build a global network of subsistence communities to promote knowledge exchange. "We want to help these communities share their most successful sustainability strategies, as well as insights about how to effectively convey the importance of their traditional practices to institutional decision-makers at all levels, from the UN to local government bodies," Douglass says. "Indigenous people have deep knowledge about adaptations that have worked for them in the past, and their voices should be heard." 📍



THE BOOK KING

**34 years, 112 contracts, one legendary professor.
How Sam Freedman turns his journalism students
into published authors. By Rebecca Shapiro**

Casey Parks '18JRN spent more than twenty years chasing an idea. After coming out as gay to her homophobic family in rural Louisiana, she learned that her grandmother had grown up across the street from, in her grandmother's words, "a woman who lived like a man" — something unheard of in the Bible Belt of the 1950s.

Parks, a reporter for *The Oregonian*, knew there was a story there, so she started taking trips back to Louisiana to research the life of this enigmatic person. But she didn't know what form the story would take. At first, she imagined it as a podcast, then as a documentary film. It never occurred to her that it might be a book.

"I worked at newspapers, which felt like a totally different kind of writing," she says. "And the entire system seemed daunting to me. How do you get an agent? How do you sell an idea?"

But when Parks enrolled in a master's program at Columbia Journalism School, a mentor advised her to apply to Sam Freedman's six-credit book-writing seminar. Four years later, Parks's first book, *Diary of a Misfit*, was on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*.

When asked about the part he played in Parks's success, Freedman demurs, calling her one of the most naturally talented writers he has ever taught. But she

is not an anomaly. In thirty-three of the thirty-four seminars he has taught since 1991, at least one student — and often several — has gotten a book deal, for a total of 112 contracts. Alumni of the class have gone on to critical and commercial success, winning major prizes and hitting bestseller lists.

At the same time, Freedman has enjoyed his own literary accolades. A former *New York Times* columnist, he is the author of ten books on topics ranging from college football to the state of modern American Jewry to the rise of a popular Black church in Brooklyn. He was a finalist at the 1990 National Book Awards for his first book, *Small Victories*, which followed an extraordinary teacher through a year at a troubled inner-city school. In 1997, *The Inheritance: How Three Families and America Moved from Roosevelt to Reagan and Beyond*, a look at the American political landscape over the course of the twentieth century, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. His most recent book, *Into the Bright Sunshine*, published in 2023, details Hubert Humphrey's impact on the civil-rights movement.

What's the secret to Freedman's success? His students say it's his perfect combination of tough love and unwavering support. "He's very hard on his students, but you quickly come to realize

it's only because he cares so much," says Josie Cox '22BUS, the author of *Women Money Power*, who took the class during her year as a Knight-Bagehot Fellow in business journalism. "He'll push you to your limits but then will be your cheerleader forever."

Freedman says that his use of inspiration combined with intimidation stems from his own relationship with influential teachers and editors. "They had very high standards, but once you proved yourself, you knew that they were always with you," he says. "That mix is what pushes me to do my best writing."

Freedman works with students tirelessly on their ideas. He teaches the fundamentals of great storytelling, suggests structural changes, and polishes prose, shaming them out of their clichés, their mixed metaphors, and their overwriting. He demystifies the publishing process and shares his connections with industry professionals. Above all, he makes it clear that there's no magic wand. "The ethos of the class is struggle, perseverance, and improvement," he says. "Try, fail, try again."

That work ethic has been with Freedman since the fourth grade, when he first decided to pursue a career in journalism. "I worked on my junior high school newspaper, my high school newspaper, and then my college newspaper. In the

summers, I did internships. There was always a clear next step.”

After earning his BA from the University of Wisconsin, where he studied history and journalism, Freedman took a job at *The Courier-News*, a local paper in Bridgewater, New Jersey, and then moved to the now defunct *Suburban Trib*, a subsidiary of the *Chicago Tribune*. His beat was education — he covered nearly fifty school districts — which proved to be invaluable preparation for his role as a teacher.

But perhaps the greatest gift of that second job was Cissi Falligant, a colleague who shared Freedman’s literary sensibility. “We called her Max, after the legendary book editor Maxwell Perkins,” Freedman says. Falligant nudged

the school, which served a population of almost entirely Black, Latino, and Asian-American students, was “failing,” but Freedman soon discovered that the situation at Seward Park was far more complicated than that.

Freedman left his job and embedded in the school for the 1987–88 academic year, following Siegel, whom he calls “an extraordinary educator,” through near-insurmountable challenges and hard-fought triumphs. The result was the book *Small Victories*. Though it was Freedman’s first foray into long-form narrative nonfiction, he says that his years writing for the *Times* helped prepare him for the intensive research necessary to write a book. “You can’t just interview someone and write down

“I had no intention of writing a book. I took the class because Sam is an extraordinary teacher and mentor and role model, and I wanted the opportunity to learn more from him,” Cohen says. “But a few weeks before graduation, he asked if he could share some of my work with his agent. It was Sam’s generosity that changed the entire trajectory of my career.”

Shortly after the class ended, she had a book contract — *Train Go Sorry* was published in 1992 — and Freedman realized that his seminar had legs. He proposed teaching it as a full six-credit course specifically devoted to book development.

From the start, the class has been application-only, and students need to have a source-based narrative-nonfiction book idea (no fiction or straight memoir) to apply. Each year, hundreds of students compete for sixteen spots. “I admit people only on the basis of the idea,” he says. “I don’t take recommendations from professors. I don’t look at grades. It all comes down to the idea.”

If Freedman likes the idea, he’ll e-mail the student a series of follow-up questions: Why should this be a book and not a magazine article? Will it still be relevant in five years? How does it complement books already published on the subject? What kind of access do you have to sources?

Freedman rarely accepts a pitch on the first try, and students are often rejected several times, which can be part of the learning experience. “It forced me to figure out how to sell it to him,” says Parks, who was initially rejected. Ultimately, the application process helped her with a defining feature of the book — weaving her own personal story into the narrative.

“I really didn’t want to, and we kind of had a tussle about it,” she says. “But he pushed me to try, and ultimately, of course, it made the book what it is.”

Similarly, Cox applied to the class thinking that she wanted to write a sweeping history of women in the workplace. Freedman convinced her to draw out the stories of some of the key figures she was researching, to make the narrative more character-driven. It changed the way she approached the book.

“He’s looking for resilience, determination, and ambition. If you can take his feedback and prove that you have those three things, he’s likely to take a chance on you.”

Freedman toward his next job, at *The New York Times*, where he worked as a staff reporter from 1981 to 1987. For part of that time, as a culture reporter, he covered theater and wrote feature stories about actors and playwrights.

“I saw exactly one hundred plays during that time period. Some of the real greats — Marsha Norman, Sam Shepard, August Wilson, Terrence McNally,” Freedman says. “It gave me such a course in narrative and in character development.”

Falligant made another recommendation that would have a profound impact on Freedman’s career: she told him to read *The Power Broker*, the epic 1,286-page biography of urban developer Robert Moses by Robert Caro ’68JRN. “I was reading a lot of fiction at that time,” says Freedman, “but Caro opened my eyes to the modern narrative-nonfiction tradition.”

In 1986, a young English teacher named Jessica Siegel ’92JRN wrote a letter to Freedman, inviting him to speak to her journalism students at Seward Park High School, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The city said

what they say and call it a story,” Freedman says. “You need to find out why something happened, how something happened, the historical context for it. Of course, in a book there’s a lot more room for that.”

In the spring of 1990, Freedman was hired as an adjunct professor at Columbia Journalism School, teaching cultural-affairs reporting and community reporting. But fresh off his own experience in book publishing, he was also interested in working with students on long-form narrative development. The following spring, he introduced a three-credit elective on the subject called “Reading, Thinking, and Writing.”

One student, Leah Hager Cohen ’91JRN, stood out. Cohen was writing her master’s thesis about New York’s Lexington School for the Deaf, one of the nation’s oldest schools for the hearing-impaired. Cohen, who is not deaf, grew up on the Lexington campus, where her father served as superintendent, and she was interested in exploring the history of the school and the complex issues facing the deaf community.

“He’s looking for resilience, determination, and ambition,” Cox says. “If you can take his feedback and prove that you have those three things, he’s likely to take a chance on you.”

A hallmark of Freedman’s course is the length of the classes. The seminar meets once a week, for seven hours. When people ask him about this, Freedman likes to quote a story about the jazz musicians Miles Davis and John Coltrane. While Davis was famous for his efficiency, Coltrane was known for his “sheets of sound,” often soloing for more than twenty minutes. “People used to ask him, Why you gotta play so long? And he’d say, That’s how long it takes to get it all in,” Freedman says.

In a typical class early in the semester, Freedman will spend an hour on a writing lesson, then introduce guest speakers, and finally workshop students’ assignments. Later, the majority of the class time is spent working on proposals and sample chapters. Students typically read six books over the course of the semester. One is always by a class alum, and one is always fiction. “I like to start the class with something overwhelming or intimidating, like Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns*,” he says. “I don’t want the students to coast after they’ve been accepted. I want everyone to be jolted back to reality.”

Freedman invites a variety of authors to speak, as well as agents and editors. Parks says that Freedman was instrumental in introducing her to her literary agent. “She has a lot of huge clients, and I don’t think she would have looked twice at me otherwise,” Parks says. “But his reputation is pretty sterling. She read my hundred-page proposal the week I sent it to her.”

While Freedman did not directly introduce Cox to her agent, she said that taking the class gave her the courage to pursue the relationship and eventually sell her book. “I had a space where I could get all of my dumb questions out of the way,” she says. “Which made me so much more confident through the entire process.”

Freedman encourages his students to stay in contact with each other after graduating, to lend support through the arduous steps of writing and publishing. He maintains a Facebook group, open to alumni from all thirty-four years of the workshop, where people can post about their book readings and reviews, ask for a couch to crash on during a research trip, and offer feedback to each other. “Honestly, it’s the only reason I’m still on Facebook,” Cox says.

For many alums, Freedman remains a guiding force. Andrea Elliott ’99JRN, a *New York Times* journalist, won the Pulitzer Prize for her book *Invisible Child*, about a teenager living in a New York City homeless shelter. But she still sends anything important that she writes to Freedman to review — just as she sent him a draft of her book, which she says he of course made better.

“He had this way of reaching past the noise of his students — all the insecurities and half-formed ideas and scattered reporting — and seeing our promise,” she says. “And that made me work harder than ever before. He remains the most treasured editor in my life.”

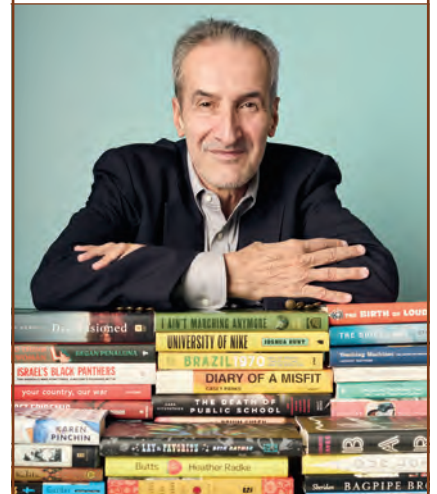
This spring will mark Freedman’s last year teaching the book workshop. He plans to retire to spend more time with family and focus on his own projects. Though he doesn’t know who will take the reins, he feels optimistic about the future of the class. He says that while the publishing industry may wax and wane, the students are a constant. “The passion is unchanged, the work ethic is unchanged,” says Freedman. And even more important, “the eagerness to put something good out into the world is unchanged.”

Cohen, who has written four nonfiction books since *Train Go Sorry*, says that she is deeply moved by the legacy of the class and by the indefatigable teacher at its helm.

“The gift that he gives his students is holding us to the same tough standards that he holds himself to. It changed me as a writer and as a person,” she says. “The gift that he gives the world are all of the incredible stories that he has ushered into being. We are so much richer for it.” 🍷

Book Club


A selection of titles by Freedman’s students



- S. H. Fernando '92JRN** *The New Beats* ● **Jacob Levenson '99JRN** *The Secret Epidemic* ● **Harry Bruinius '00JRN** *Better for All the World* ● **Mirta Ojito '01JRN** *Finding Mañana* ● **Joan Quigley '02JRN** *The Day the Earth Caved In* ● **Claire Hoffman '04JRN** *Greetings from Utopia Park* ● **Kelly McMasters '05SOA** *Welcome to Shirley* ● **Alia Malek '06JRN** *A Country Called Amreeka* ● **Molly Birnbaum '08JRN** *Season to Taste* ● **Kathryn J. McGarr '09JRN** *The Whole Damn Deal* ● **Artis Henderson '10JRN** *Unremarried Widow* ● **Raúl Gallegos '10JRN, '11SIPA** *Crude Nation* ● **Dana Goldstein '11JRN** *The Teacher Wars* ● **Philip Eil '11SOA** *Prescription for Pain* ● **Dan Egan '12JRN** *The Death and Life of the Great Lakes* ● **Shomari Wills '13JRN** *Black Fortunes* ● **Regan Penaluna '14JRN** *How to Think Like a Woman* ● **Ian S. Port '16SOA** *The Birth of Loud* ● **Matthew Van Meter '16SOA** *Deep Delta Justice* ● **Casey Parks '18JRN** *Diary of a Misfit* ● **Heather Radke '19SOA** *Butts* ● **Karen Pinchin '19JRN** *Kings of Their Own Ocean* ● **Gal Beckerman '21JRN** *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone* ● **Josie Cox '22BUS** *Women Money Power*



THE PARKINSON'S PUZZLE



Columbia researchers are working to treat, prevent, and ultimately cure Parkinson's disease, the world's fastest-growing neurological disorder
By Paul Hond

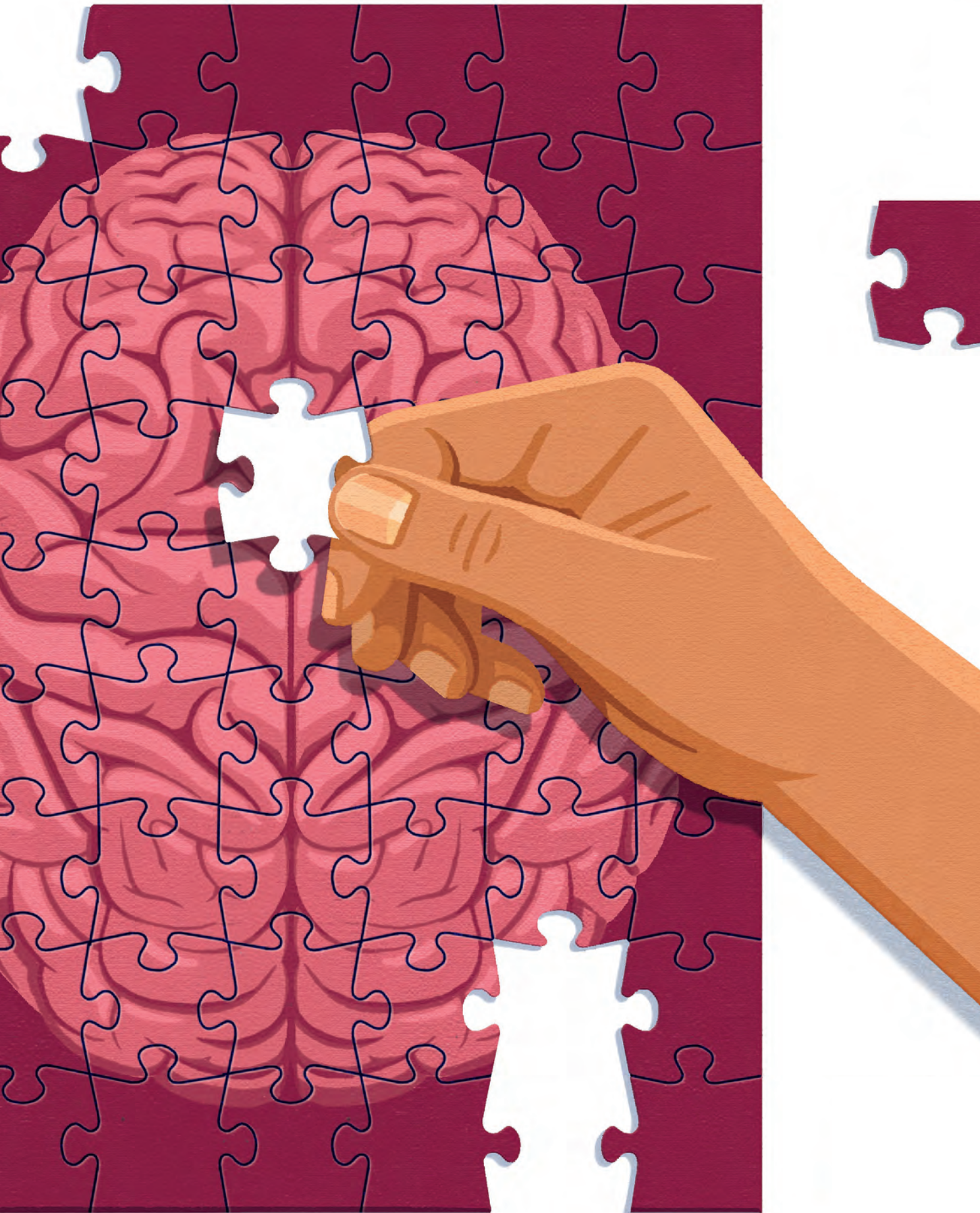
Ping-pong is not a game that lends itself well to chatter. It demands sharp focus, quick reflexes, and a light touch, and the dozen players who have gathered this Monday afternoon at PingPod, a table-tennis venue on West 99th Street, are locked in the wordless rhythms of the back-and-forth. Aside from the occasional “Nice spin!” or grunt of self-reproach, the room is filled with the hollow percussion of little white balls glancing off paddles, skipping over the tops of the black tables, and rattling across the floor.

Between games, one of the players, Lucy Miller '81GS, praises the virtues of the activity. “Ping-pong is good for eye-hand coordination and coordination of the feet, so it's good for people with Parkinson's disease, because we have difficulty with those things,” Miller says. Like the other players here, Miller, who is seventy, is part of the New York chapter of a global organization called PingPongParkinson. Its members, all of whom have the disease, meet weekdays at ping-pong spots around Manhattan for community, exercise, and enjoyment.

“It's fun,” says Miller. “We have some pretty good players.”

Parkinson's, or PD, is a progressive disorder in which brain cells involved in movement and coordination deteriorate and die. There are some ninety thousand new cases in the US each year, adding to the more than ten million cases worldwide, making it the world's fastest-growing neurological disease. Celebrities like Michael J. Fox have raised awareness of Parkinson's through their public struggles and advocacy, and in recent years such figures as Alan Alda, Linda Ronstadt, and Jesse Jackson have shared their diagnoses. Parkinson's has also become the subject of legislation: this past summer, President Joe Biden signed the National Plan to End Parkinson's Act, which will increase federal funding for related research.

The Parkinson's Act is an important step forward in the effort to combat a disorder of profound mystery. Researchers don't fully understand what causes it, and there is no cure. Men have double the risk of women, and adding to the puzzle is that no two cases are the same. The motor symptoms — tremor,



slowness, muscle stiffness, trouble with balance and gait, and slow or slurred speech — vary from person to person. So does the rate of the progression. And while the disease is not in itself fatal, it can lead to life-threatening conditions.

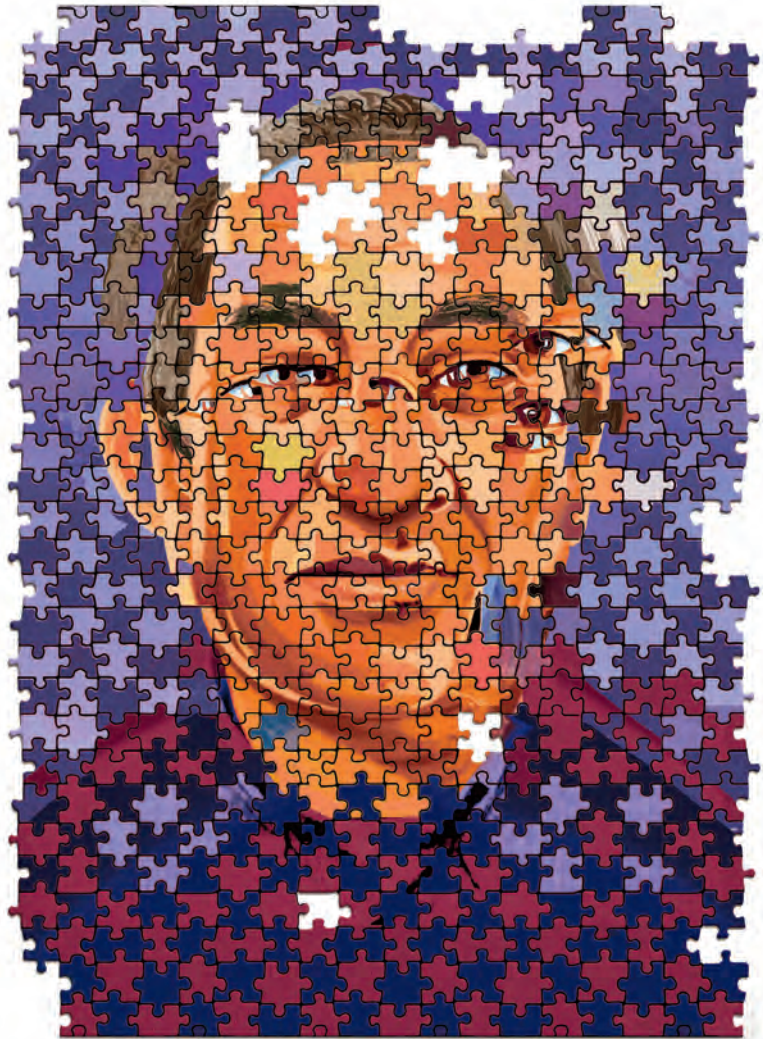
A retired pharmaceutical researcher, Miller had been a promising ballerina as a teenager. But a knee injury changed that, and at twenty-one she enrolled at Columbia's School of General Studies, where she majored in physiological psychology. About ten years ago, she began experiencing neurological issues, including speech problems. Doctors diagnosed her with Parkinson's and prescribed levodopa (also known as L-dopa), which since the 1960s has been the standard treatment for tremor in Parkinson's.

Hailed as a miracle drug, L-dopa is a precursor to dopamine, a neurotransmitter involved with movement. In Parkinson's, different types of brain cells die, but it is the death of dopamine neurons specifically that causes the symptoms. L-dopa, taken in pill form, travels through the bloodstream into the brain, where it converts to dopamine. It also has a host of possible side effects, such as nausea, confusion, and, with long-term use, involuntary movements (dyskinesia).

"When I got the diagnosis, I was very upset," Miller says. "But then, because I had so few side effects from the medication, I didn't pay much attention to it."

These days, Miller's main concern is keeping her balance: Parkinson's increases the risk of falls. That's something Miller has to deal with each time she takes her spirited German shepherd puppy, Simone, for a walk. Ping-pong helps with balance, to be sure, but walking Simone can be an adventure, and Miller plans to get her trained.

Ever since the English physician James Parkinson, in his 1817 work *An Essay on the Shaking Palsy*, first unified the symptoms of tremor, stiffness, and altered gait into a single disease, scientists have battled to solve the riddles of Parkinson's. For neuroscientist David Sulzer '88GSAS,



that quest borders on an obsession. Sulzer's lab, located on Columbia's medical campus in Washington Heights, focuses on how synapses — the junctions where two neurons meet and transfer information — are involved in neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, Huntington's, and Lewy body dementia. "One of the problems with all these disorders is that they are only recognized at relatively late stages," Sulzer says.

There are early, non-motor warning signs of Parkinson's, such as constipation, depression, and trouble swallowing. Many people also experience loss of smell, lightheadedness after standing up, and REM sleep behavior disorder, in which they act out their dreams by kicking and thrashing. All these things may happen years before the telltale motor symptoms appear. In most cases, by the

time of diagnosis, the brain has already lost 80 percent of its dopamine neurons.

Of the estimated hundred billion neurons in the human brain, only a tiny fraction — about four hundred thousand — make dopamine. Their axons — fiber-like structures that convey electrical impulses — are the longest of any type of neuron in the body. "If you stretch out one dopamine axon, it might be four meters long," Sulzer says. "These neurons are very complicated, require a lot of energy and work to maintain themselves, and are susceptible to distress." In Parkinson's, that distress comes when alpha-synuclein, a protein that regulates the release of neurotransmitters, including dopamine, begins to misfold and accumulate within dopamine neurons, poisoning and eventually killing the cells.

Up until fairly recently, the hunt for the origins of the disease has focused on the brain's movement centers. But over the past two decades, some scientists have turned their attention to another part of the body: the gut.

Sulzer is part of this "gut-first" movement, and he believes that Parkinson's may have autoimmune features that start in the intestines. With a \$9 million grant from the ASAP initiative (Aligning Science Across Parkinson's, supported by Google cofounder Sergey Brin), Sulzer is leading a team of researchers from Columbia, the California Institute of Technology, the University of Alabama, and the La Jolla Institute for Immunology to get to the root of Parkinson's. Working with Columbia neurologists Roy Alcalay '10PH and Julian Agin-Liebes, neuropathologists Dritan Agalliu '06GSAS and Osama Al Dalahmah, postdoc Francesca Garretti '21GSAS, and graduate student Connor Monahan, the Sulzer Lab has been examining the role that gut neurons might play in the disease.

While the brain contains most of the body's neurons, there are about one hundred million neurons in the gastrointestinal wall. In one experiment, the researchers injected mice with alpha-synuclein, which then gathered on the surface of the gut neurons. In response, the mice produced T cells — a type of white blood cell crucial for immune function — which attacked the affected neurons. The result? "The mice got gastrointestinal symptoms similar to those of Parkinson's patients, including constipation," Sulzer says.

Now Sulzer is working with immunologists who are examining the blood of people with Parkinson's. "So far, we've been able to identify two proteins that are recognized by T cells of the immune system of Parkinson's patients," he says. "It's even possible that this autoimmune attack is what's causing the cell death in the disease." The team published its findings this past summer in the journal *Neuron*. Sulzer's goal is to develop a mouse model that fully mimics the human progression of the disease. If Parkinson's actually starts in the gut, he says, it may be possible to identify and stop it before it reaches the brain.

Serge Przedborski, who is chief of the Division of Movement Disorders in Columbia's neurology department, has spent years absorbed in another intriguing aspect of Parkinson's: the uneven pattern of neuronal death. In Parkinson's patients, he says, some brain cells are more susceptible than others to the disease process. As Przedborski explains, dopamine neurons are found primarily in two adjacent regions of the midbrain — the substantia nigra (SN) and the ventral tegmental area (VTA). But for some reason, it's mainly the SN neurons that die. "These neurons have the same exact structure," says Przedborski, "and yet even in advanced patients, you will always end with many more VTA neurons than SN neurons. Why?"

In most cases, by the time of diagnosis, the brain has already lost 80 percent of its dopamine neurons.



To find answers, Przedborski is using the tools of molecular and cellular biology. His lab focuses on the molecular basis of neurodegeneration, searching for the mechanisms in Parkinson's by which cellular processes destroy one group of dopamine neurons but not the other. The brain has more non-neuronal cells than neurons, and some of these cells coexist with neurons and support them. Przedborski began to wonder what role these non-neuronal cells might play in neuronal health.

Working with immunologist Elizabeth Bradshaw, Przedborski and his team are using brain samples from the New York Brain Bank at Columbia to conduct a large-scale study comparing the features of neuronal and non-neuronal cells across different regions of the brain. Przedborski suspects that the non-neuronal cells, called glial cells, may influence neurons by creating environments that are either friendly or hostile. "We have shown that if you take a neuron which will eventually die from the disease process and put it in

a more supportive environment, it will show greater resistance than the same neurons that you embed in a more hostile environment," Przedborski says. "So if we can identify the molecular or cellular determinants that make the VTA neurons more resistant to Parkinson's, we can try to devise therapies to boost the resilience of the more susceptible SN neurons. That's the goal."

The Sulzer Lab, too, is looking at VTA neurons. A decade ago, one of Sulzer's postdocs, Yvonne Schmitz, using Parkinson's model mice, discovered that the amino acid d-serine stimulates growth of dopamine neurons in the VTA. This causes the neurons to branch and extend into the depleted SN, where they supply enough dopamine to restore lost motor

function — basically bolstering the work of L-dopa. Now Sulzer has received a grant from SPARKS NS, a nonprofit that funds promising clinical neuroscientific research. The researchers plan to do a small clinical trial on d-serine in humans. "This new approach, which we call 'neurorestorative,' may improve symptoms even after diagnosis," says Sulzer, "and we hope it can help patients very soon."

Columbia has been central to Parkinson's research ever since neurologist Lewis Doshay founded the Parkinson's Disease Clinic at Columbia in the 1940s. In 1957, William Black 1926SEAS, founder and president of Chock full o'Nuts, established the Parkinson's Disease Foundation, the first private Parkinson's philanthropic organization in the US (in 2016 it merged with the National Parkinson Foundation to become the Parkinson's Foundation). Black also funded a building at Columbia, on 168th Street — the William Black Medical Research Building — which opened in 1965, with a floor dedicated to basic Parkinson's science.

Doshay's successor as clinic director was neurologist Melvin Yahr, whose studies of L-dopa in the 1960s led to its acceptance as the model treatment for motor symptoms in Parkinson's. In 1967, Yahr and Columbia neurologist Margaret Hoehn created a system to grade the severity of Parkinson's symptoms — the Hoehn and Yahr Scale, which is still used today. Yahr left Columbia to become chair of the neurology department at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in 1973, and that's when Stanley Fahn took over.

Fahn, now ninety-one and living in Westchester County, is a giant in the field. Sulzer calls him "the single most important member of the Columbia PD community" and "the most influential Parkinson's neurologist after James Parkinson." Fahn taught at Columbia for fifty-seven years and trained many of the world's top Parkinson's neurologists. In his work, Fahn determined that Parkinson's was related to other, less common diseases that caused abnormal movements, such as Huntington's disease, which is marked by excessive movement

ties of Parkinson's. This is the principle behind deep brain stimulation (DBS), a mainstay surgical technique for people with severe motor disturbances. In DBS, doctors implant electrodes in the brain's subthalamic nucleus (STN), a key structure in motor function, then stimulate it with electrical impulses. This basically jams the excessive neuronal activity of the STN that is a hallmark of Parkinson's. Przedborski's hope is that gene therapy will normalize motor circuits and improve symptoms without the need for the batteries and hardware used in DBS.

Baltuch is a pioneer of DBS and since the 1990s has performed thousands of operations. And yet he sees the motor symptoms of Parkinson's as just part of the picture: a much harder problem for patients and caretakers, he says, comes at the end stages: cognitive decline. This occurs most frequently in people who have been diagnosed late in life. Overall, some 20 to 50 percent of people with Parkinson's will develop problems with memory and attention, and about 80 percent of those cases will progress to full-blown dementia. "The holy grail

ultrasound waves in Alzheimer's patients to safely permeate the BBB.

"If we can open up the BBB and then noninvasively inject neuroprotective agents to prevent cognitive decline and then close the BBB — that would be next-level," Baltuch says. "Treating motor symptoms is obviously very important. But if the genie came out of the bottle and granted me one wish for Parkinson's, I would immediately say: prevent cognitive decline. The rest we can deal with."

In 1997, Roger Duvoisin '50CC, then chair of neurology at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, made a major discovery. He and his colleagues were studying the DNA of members of a large Italian family of six hundred people, more than sixty of whom had Parkinson's. The team identified a shared gene mutation among the Parkinson's carriers — the first to be implicated in the disease.

The gene, called SNCA, produces alpha-synuclein, that culprit protein that can misfold and accumulate within dopamine neurons. Duvoisin's breakthrough opened a new frontier in Parkinson's research. Since then, scientists have uncovered some twenty Parkinson's-linked mutations that can be passed on genetically. These account for 10 to 15 percent of all Parkinson's cases.

From the start, Columbia has been a leading center for the genetic study of Parkinson's. Though the majority of cases are not tied to a genetic mutation, identifying and studying heritable mutations could illuminate the nature of the disease. Roy Alcalay and fellow Columbia neurologist Karen Marder have led studies showing that some populations have a greater likelihood of carrying a mutation: people with early-onset Parkinson's (starting below age fifty); people with a strong family history of Parkinson's; and people of specific ancestries. The most common mutations occur in the PRKN, LRRK2, and GBA genes, and studies at Columbia and elsewhere have found that Ashkenazi Jews and North African Berbers are more likely than other groups to carry the LRRK2 mutation.



"If the genie came out of the bottle and granted me one wish for Parkinson's, I would immediately say: prevent cognitive decline."

(hyperkinesia). To encompass the whole family of diseases, Fahn changed the name of the Parkinson's Clinic to the Division of Movement Disorders and served as its director for forty years.

Today, Przedborski carries on the work of his predecessors, with technology undreamed of in Doshay's day. In a current study, Przedborski, with Columbia neurosurgeon Gordon Baltuch and Weill Cornell neurosurgeon Michael Kaplitt, is investigating gene therapy for advanced Parkinson's.

The idea is to program genes to instruct neurons to produce gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a neurotransmitter that dampens hyperactive neuronal firing, thus mitigating the motor abnormali-

ties of Parkinson's is, How can we prevent cognitive decline?" Baltuch says. "Will we be able to use neuroprotective agents to prevent cells from dying?"

In theory, it's possible. In practice, however, there is a serious impediment: the blood-brain barrier (BBB), a semipermeable membrane that protects the brain by filtering out harmful substances. While the molecules in some medications are small enough to pass through the BBB, the ones in the neuroprotective agents are too big. But as Baltuch notes, there is hope. This past year, Columbia biomedical engineers led by Elisa Konofagou and Sua Bae published a paper in the journal *Theranostics* detailing their success in using focused

The researchers also observed a correspondence between specific mutations and the ways different patients experience the disease. Says Alcalay, “We found that LRRK2 patients have a milder disease and less cognitive changes than those with the GBA mutation. People with GBA mutations have more non-motor symptoms, such as REM sleep behavior disorder and loss of sense of smell, have a faster disease progression, and are more likely to develop cognitive changes.”

These studies involved hundreds of people. Alcalay, recognizing the shortcomings of a blanket approach to treating Parkinson’s, saw the need to provide genetic data to a much larger population. If people with Parkinson’s knew their genetic status, he reasoned, they might opt to participate in trials for precision medicine, an approach increasingly used in oncology, in which doctors tailor treatment based on genotype and other individualized factors. Alcalay made his pitch, and in 2018 the Parkinson’s Foundation launched a nationwide genetic study, with Alcalay as its lead researcher.

This ongoing project, called PD GENERation, offers free genetic testing and counseling for people with Parkinson’s (genetic testing isn’t covered by health insurance). The study has expanded to all fifty states as well as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Israel, and Canada. To date, researchers have tested some eighteen thousand people, and more than 12 percent have turned up positive for a genetic mutation. That surprised Alcalay, who had expected roughly 5 percent. “As the study grows, more people may turn out to be positive, because science continues to identify new variants in known and novel genes,” he says.

To get the fullest, most useful genetic picture of Parkinson’s, it is vital to recruit people from as many backgrounds and parts of the world as possible. At Columbia, researchers are focusing on under-represented people in the surrounding community, deploying Spanish-speaking research assistants and providing Spanish-language counseling. The math

is simple, says Alcalay: “The more people who know their genotype, the more who will want to do clinical trials. And the more clinical trials that are done, the more likely they are to succeed — and the more likely we are to change the field.”

Recruitment is not easy. As Columbia neurologist Hiral Shah explains, some people may be suspicious of genetic testing, especially those belonging to groups with a history of mistreatment at the hands of the medical establishment. Shah, who works in the Division of Movement Disorders, focuses her research on Black and Latino populations in Harlem and Hamilton Heights, working with faith-based groups to spread awareness and strike down some of the myths around the disease (e.g., that it only strikes older white men, that symptoms like tremor or changes in posture or gait are part of normal aging, and that it’s contagious). “Until our health-care research is inclusive and represents our entire community,” says Shah, “we can’t expect to find the scientific results that are going to meaningfully change lives. We must bring everyone into the fold, because we believe that we could be one diverse patient away from a cure.”


Erika Adelman, who is the social worker for the Division of Movement Disorders and the social-work manager for the Neurological Institute at CUIMC, oversees many Parkinson’s programs, both in the community and at CUIMC, which offers a full range of patient resources. There is a patient support group and a caregivers’ support group. There is a virtual concert series, a speech-therapy collaboration with Teachers College, and a program called Parkinson’s Pals that connects patients to medical students in an attempt to reduce social isolation. There is a monthly access-to-care orientation that provides information on how to get home care, Medicaid accommodations, disability benefits, and transportation. And there is a program for those who have been diagnosed within the past nine months, in which neuropsychologists teach practical skills, coping strategies, and radical acceptance.

“People who get a Parkinson’s diagnosis often go through the stages of grief,” Adelman says. “And they go through this process at different rates. Radical acceptance means really learning to embrace the fact of the diagnosis and the fact that there’s a life beyond it.” As for managing the symptoms, Adelman encourages “exercise, exercise, exercise, because it is one of the best tools we have to fight back against this disease. We also recommend getting involved with meaningful social activities as well as doing brain-training exercises like crossword puzzles, reading, or learning new instruments or languages, which increase the brain’s neuroplasticity. The brain is like a muscle — it needs to be worked.”

 In another Monday afternoon at PingPongParkinson, Lucy Miller grabs a paddle. All around, balls skitter and hop. Miller happily reports that Simone, her German shepherd, has been through an intensive training course. Now, at Miller’s command, the dog will sit, stay, come, heel, and lie down. This will make their daily walks a lot easier.

At another table, Ron Hiram ’81BUS is in a groove. Hiram, seventy-one, spent years on Wall Street, then worked in venture capital. He was diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 2019, after his wife noticed his tremors. Hiram then began playing ping-pong and even hired a coach. He has a mean backhand and a nasty chop.

“For me, the major thing with PD is the tremor,” he says between serves. “I don’t take L-dopa — I’m a little fearful of the side effects — but eventually I don’t think I’ll have much of a choice.” Hiram walks at least three miles a day but says ping-pong is “the activity that makes me most motivated to exercise and do something for Parkinson’s.” He drops a serve and awaits the return.

At 3:30 p.m., the Monday session of PingPongParkinson ends. The players set down their paddles and retrieve their jackets and coats. It’s a strong community, self-governed and supportive. The game of life continues, and the players will be back next week. 

DESIGNING ALUMNI

Drawing from nature, history, and emerging trends, Columbia interior designers share their decorating wisdom *By Julia Joy*



GIDEON MENDELSON



As the founder of Mendelson Group, Gideon Mendelson '96CC has been configuring New York interiors since 2003.

Signature aesthetic

Timeless and eclectic modernism. We lean classicist when it comes to architectural details — maintaining original elements from historic homes, for instance — but with furnishings, the 1930s through '60s is really our wheelhouse.

Preferred wall treatments

Decorative finishes or wallpaper: they add texture, pattern, and a level of depth that can't be achieved with ordinary paint.

On mixing patterns and colors

Maximalist design is popular now, but I do it in a restrained way. The key is to layer patterns that are not competing in scale. For example, if you're choosing a wallpaper with a floral design and also have patterned upholstery, make sure the flowers on the wallpaper and the details on the upholstery are different in size.

I recommend using a color wheel to find complementary or analogous combinations that work. Sometimes I'll find a painting I love — perhaps something abstract from the 1950s or '60s — and steal the palette. Josef Albers's color-study paintings are great reference points.

Choosing the right colors requires knowing your tastes. Take a look in your closet — what are you wearing every day? Which palettes make you the most comfortable? I find pale blues and greens calming, because they remind me of nature, but someone else might find red relaxing. Trust your gut.





DOROTHY DAY HUNTSMAN



Dorothy Day Huntsman 'OOGS, founder of the Salt Lake City firm Dayhouse Studio, specializes in biophilic design, which integrates nature into homes to support mental and physical well-being.

Biophilic benefits

The approach is rooted in the idea that humans benefit from natural surroundings. Studies have shown that nature-centric, relaxing spaces can reduce stress and enhance cognitive function.

Biophilic design also promotes environmental responsibility: we incorporate solar panels, ventilation, and natural light, while improving indoor air quality with plants and limewash paint.

Elements and accents

Natural materials like wood, stone, and organic fabric. We embrace imperfection through timeworn furniture and weathered textures that lend

themselves to a lived-in feel, while using decor like gemstones, sheepskin throws, and brass or copper to add organic warmth. Soft ambient lighting — what we call “soupy” lighting — promotes a calming atmosphere, along with fountains and aquariums. Ideally, every window should overlook gardens or landscapes, but if you’re in a city apartment, you can use houseplants to bring the feeling of outside inside.

Furnishing faux pas

Overcrowding a room, using lighting that strains the eyes, and choosing style over comfort. I also dislike the obsession with “fast furniture” made with cheap synthetic material. Many of those products contain harmful chemicals like VOCs and are poorly made, resulting in a throwaway culture that’s wasteful and unsustainable. Investing in high-quality natural furnishings, or using quality gently used items, promotes spaces that are not only healthier but also timeless.



NASOZI KAKEMBO



Nasozi Kakembo '08GSAPP is the founder of xN Studio, a Brooklyn- and Uganda-based design firm and retailer

focused on decorative items from African artisans. Kakembo's first book, *The African Decor Edit*, was published this past fall.

African decor essentials

Organic materials, neutral colors, geometric designs, and traditional objects like art, stools, and baskets. Woven baskets have historically been used throughout Africa for purposes like fermenting beer and carrying wedding dowries, but today they're popular for storage in homes around the world. I like to use them as planters, as hamper, and to hold fruit.

Objects with stories and impact are so much more than "things," and ethical sourcing — which I define as purchasing heritage-related goods in a way that directly benefits their community of origin — is a core tenet of my design philosophy.

Best decorating advice

It's important to take your time. I tend to have all of my design ideas mapped out in my head as soon as I see a space, but I give myself permission to feel out different components over time. I've been in my current home for almost a year, and I only just decided on a new light fixture for the kitchen. Feel free to swap the functions of rooms as your space evolves with your lifestyle.

Design pet peeve

I don't love rainbow-organized books on bookshelves. Nothing against rainbows! I love them in the sky and on flags, but not on bookshelves, where, in my opinion, books should be organized by topic or genre, not by color.



NASOZI KAKEMBO



SHELLEY CEKIRGE



Shelley Cekirge '05SOA studied acting and theater design at Columbia before founding Shelley Cekirge Interiors, a New Jersey-based firm.

Color approach

Columbia's MFA program was instrumental in my development as a creative person and taught me to think about art in a different way. As a designer, I often start with a neutral palette for the walls and furniture before adding colorful accents like artwork, throw blankets, pillows, vases, coasters, and coffee-table books.

Kitchen and bathroom trends

For kitchens, people are gravitating toward pendant lights, unique hardware, and countertops that connect to matching backsplashes, which eliminate the need for tiles and are easy to clean.

I also see a lot of synthetic surfaces like engineered quartz and porcelain used in place of marble. These options are durable and practical, especially for messy or high-traffic spaces. Of course, nothing can replicate the beauty of natural stone.

Common mistakes

Oversized furniture that inhibits traffic flow. Using a floor plan is key to deter-



mining furniture size. I also see people trying to keep old furnishings, thinking that if they reupholster or refinish them, they will save money. You're often better off buying new items.

I generally stay away from anything too blingy. If you're going in a whimsical direction, balance the design out with organic elements such as wood and neutral tones so you don't feel like you're living in a Liberace fever dream. 🍷



PHOTOGRAPHY: DEAN LUIS; INTERIORS: SHELLEY CEKIRGE; TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM: DEAN LUIS; CENTER: KIRSTEN FRANCIS

EXPLORATIONS

FRONTIERS OF
RESEARCH AND
DISCOVERY



The remains of a Moche royal chamber discovered in northwest Peru. At upper right, a painting of a crowned woman found on a throne inside.

Did women rule in ancient Peru?

A team of archaeologists led by Columbia professor Lisa Trever recently made a startling discovery while excavating ancient Moche ruins in Peru: a 1,400-year-old pillared chamber containing an adobe throne and colorful murals that seem to depict a female ruler. The find, at the Pañamarca archaeological site, adds to growing evidence that women held high-status positions in the Moche civilization, which flourished along Peru's northern coast from AD 350 to 850, centuries before the rise of the Inca Empire.

Buried beneath sand and brick for over a millennium, the contents of the chamber are remarkably well-preserved. The vivid murals show a woman in various scenes:

seated atop a throne, raising a scepter, and receiving visitors in a procession. The throne itself shows signs of extensive use and is embedded with strands of human hair, greenstone beads, and fine threads. It is the first royal chamber found anywhere in ancient Peru with imagery explicitly linking it to a woman.

Trever, who has studied the Moche throughout her career, notes that scholars have traditionally categorized privileged women depicted in Moche murals as ceremonial “chalice bearers” or “priestesses” subordinate to male rulers. But the new discovery paints a different picture. “This finding,” she says, “confirms that women held real social authority.”

— Christopher D. Shea '23JRN

LISA TREVER

How the science of ‘exposomics’ could improve drug safety

Every year, harm caused by medications sends seven hundred thousand people to emergency rooms and accounts for thousands of deaths in the US.

Learning how to prevent these accidents is one of the biggest challenges in medicine. It can help to analyze patients’ DNA before prescribing medications, but our genes aren’t solely responsible for adverse drug reactions. To craft truly personalized treatments, physicians would need to account for many other environmental and behavioral factors that affect our bodies. This is the promise of “exposomics,” an emerging field dedicated to mapping all the key elements that influence our physiology — from air pollution and stress to diet and exercise.

Gary Miller, a professor of environmental health sciences at Columbia’s Mailman School of Public Health, is at the forefront of this field, having conducted pioneering research on how exposomics could be harnessed to improve treatments for a wide variety of conditions. Now he has received a \$39.5 million award to lead a multi-institution research effort to develop new analytic tools that may revolutionize how physicians treat diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, and many other ailments.

Supported by the federal Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, the initiative, IndiPHARM (Individual Metabolome and Exosome Assessment for Pharmaceutical Optimization), seeks to enable physicians to assess a broad array of factors that influence drug efficacy and safety.

Unlike traditional pharmacology research,

The new project will initially focus on optimizing treatments for obesity, diabetes, and fatty liver disease, along with related conditions such as hypertension and depression. To this end, Miller and his colleagues will analyze data from several large diabetes trials, together with electronic health records from the interna-

The IndiPHARM team includes Columbia professors Randolph Singh, Serge Cremers, and George Hripacsak ’85VPS, ’00PH, as well as researchers from Harvard Medical School, the Mayo Clinic, Emory University, Brown University, and Jackson Laboratory.

In a related effort, Miller has been selected to lead



IndiPHARM will take a holistic approach, examining interactions between hundreds of drugs and thousands of common chemicals and dietary compounds. The goal of the project is to help doctors answer questions such as: What is the right drug, or combination of drugs, for an individual? How might a person’s diet or workplace exposures influence their response? What is the optimal dose for them? This will prevent adverse drug events and improve patient health overall, Miller says.

ditional, Columbia-managed OHDSI (Observational Health Data Sciences and Informatics) database network. But Miller says the analytic tools that his IndiPHARM team builds should ultimately be applicable to nearly all diseases and drug classes.

“In addition to improving care for individual patients, we think that our platform will detect drug interactions that are dangerous for wide swaths of the population but haven’t been flagged yet by regulators,” he says.

a new national exposomics coordinating center called NEXUS (Network for Exposomics in the US), established by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. NEXUS will define best practices in the field and support exposomics efforts across all NIH institutes and centers.

“Our goal is to operationalize and embed exposomics throughout the entire biomedical enterprise to advance precision environmental health,” Miller says.

— Timothy S. Paul

Don't believe everything you read about renewable energy

Pop quiz: Is it true that solar and wind farms will never be entirely reliable sources of energy? That they pose serious risks to the health of humans and wildlife? That transitioning to a green economy is costing the US jobs?

In fact, all of these claims, which circulate widely on social media and in the news, are false or misleading, according to a report published by Columbia's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law. The report, edited by Sabin Center research fellows Matthew Eisenson and Jacob Elkin '21LAW, identifies thirty-three of the most common misconceptions about renewable energy and debunks them with peer-reviewed scientific evidence and government data.

Some of the claims examined in the publication, such as the notion that solar panels emit dangerous levels of electromagnetic radiation, are entirely unsubstantiated. (The amount of radiation is similar to that produced by a toaster oven.) Others have some factual basis but are



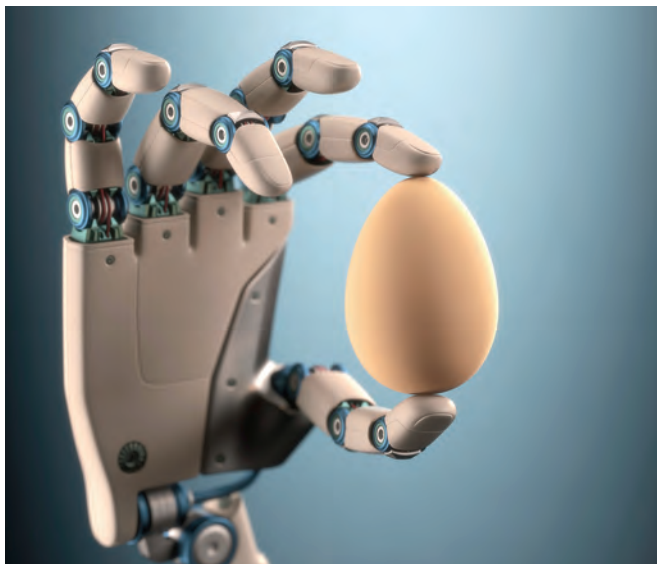
commonly repeated without necessary context: for example, the fact that wind turbines kill 250,000 birds per year is often cited without the context that millions more are threatened by extreme weather, shrinking habitats, and other effects of climate change. Disinformation campaigns funded by the fossil-fuel industry, meanwhile, continue to sow confusion about the economics of renewable energy: job losses in coal, gas, and auto manufacturing are routinely criticized without acknowledging that the US energy and automotive sectors are expected to see a net gain of millions of jobs

as they embrace green technologies. Similarly, solar and wind power are often derided as hopelessly unreliable despite rapid advances in battery storage that may soon enable them to function without fossil-fuel backup.

The authors, who include a large team of Sabin Center researchers, say their intention is not to suggest that the transition to renewable-energy systems is without challenges but rather to promote more informed debate about urgent policy matters. Disinformation campaigns, they write, are often highly effective at derailing renewable-energy projects. For example, they note that in New Jersey, public support for offshore wind turbines plummeted from 76 percent in 2019 to 54 percent in 2023, likely because of a coordinated campaign by wind opponents asserting that the turbines generate sounds that are harmful to whales. Scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration determined that the rumors are baseless, but they have persisted nonetheless.

"By contrast, offshore oil and gas drilling routinely harms marine life," the Columbia researchers write.

To read the report, visit climate.law.columbia.edu.



Robots are getting touchy-feely

Robots have come a long way, but their sense of touch has lagged behind — cue the Internet's endless clips of machines smashing eggs and breaking bottles. To improve their dexterity, a team of Columbia engineers has created a robot learning system with pressure sensors that "feel" objects with unprecedented precision and adjust the grip in real time. In tests, the robot deftly grasped fragile items like eggs and grapes and performed complex hand maneuvers, such as reorienting a hex key and serving food with a spatula. "Our tactile sensors bring robots' sensing capabilities a step closer to human levels," says Yunzhu Li, an assistant professor of computer science and the project's lead investigator.



2. Some people are at greater risk than others. Because public-health studies describe trends across whole populations, it can be difficult to determine what level of drinking is safe for you personally. Keyes says that friends and family frequently ask her advice about this. “I tell people that while drinking carries some risks for everyone, those risks are much higher for people with other health factors like obesity, smoking, weakened immune systems, or a family history of cardiovascular disease or cancer,” she says. “If you’re in good overall health and you don’t have these types of issues, there is low risk of significant health problems from moderate drinking.”

3. Binge drinking is on the rise, especially among women. One of the most concerning trends, Keyes says, has been an uptick in binge drinking among US adults, particularly women. Binge drinking — consuming four or more drinks within a few hours — intensifies alcohol’s harmful effects. And due to physiological differences, women are more susceptible to them. Keyes has found that drinking rates among women have steadily increased over the past few decades as more women have attended college, pursued careers, and delayed starting families. “The women driving this trend aren’t always the stereotypical ‘wine moms’ looking for stress relief,” she says. “They’re often highly

The myth of healthy drinking

If you’ve followed health news lately, you may have noticed scientists shifting their stance on alcohol. While red wine was once touted as life-extending, and moderate drinking was thought to reduce the risk of stroke and heart disease, researchers now warn that even small amounts of alcohol pose some threat not only to your heart but to your brain, your liver, and almost every other organ in the body.

Meanwhile, Americans are drinking more heavily than they have in decades: the average adult now consumes over five hundred drinks a year, and some 180,000 lives are lost annually to alcohol-related diseases and injuries. These trends were exacerbated by the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet they began before it,

marking a major shift in America’s drinking habits.

But just how risky is the occasional beer, cocktail, or glass of wine? Is moderation still the golden rule, or is every sip now a gamble? To find out, *Columbia Magazine* spoke with Katherine Keyes ’10PH, a professor of epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health and an expert on the dangers of our new drinking habits. Here’s what we learned.

1. Even moderate drinking poses risks.

“A scientific consensus has emerged over the past couple of years that no level of drinking is entirely safe,” says Keyes. She notes that alcohol consumption has been linked to cardiovascular disease, numerous cancers, and accelerated aging, as well as liver disease. “And

there’s a dose-response relationship, which means the more you drink, the higher your risk of these health issues.”

Keyes explains that for decades, researchers mistakenly believed that moderate drinking — defined as one drink a day for women, two for men — was beneficial, due to a blind spot in their studies. “Many people who don’t drink are choosing to abstain because they have health problems, which can make it look like moderate drinkers are comparatively healthy *as a result of* consuming alcohol,” she says. “But we now have methodological strategies to account for this and can see clearly that abstinence is the healthiest choice. Even moderate drinking raises the average adult’s risk of health problems by a small but detectable amount.”

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educated professional women drinking to socialize.” Keyes’s findings also show that people who binge drink in their youth often carry the habit into middle age, though typically at a less furious pace. “Our drinking habits tend to become embedded in how we socialize, manage our moods, and even choose partners,” she adds. “People who enjoy heavy drinking as part of their lifestyle often end up with partners who feel the same way.”

4. When in doubt, go “sober curious.”

With growing awareness of alcohol’s health risks, a “sober curious” movement has recently taken off, especially among millennials and young adults. Supporters advocate for a mindful approach to drinking, often encouraging periodic pauses like “Dry January” or “Sober October” and less alcohol consumption overall. Keyes is a big fan. “When people cut out alcohol,” she says, “they often sleep better, feel mentally sharper, and have more energy.” She emphasizes that a successful shift toward sobriety can hinge on finding creative new ways to socialize and let loose. “One mistake that a lot of public-health experts make is they assume that everybody who is drinking excessively is self-medicating

for anxiety or some other mental-health issues, when in fact the main reason people say they drink is simply to have fun,” Keyes says. But whether it’s through mocktail meetups, outdoor activities, or game nights, there are other ways for people to party, hang out with their friends, and feel in the moment. “Turning the page on alcohol becomes easier when you discover new ways of connecting with people,” she says.

5. Simply cutting back can make a difference.

If you’re concerned about how much you drink, Keyes recommends taking small, achievable steps to cut back. “If you usually have three drinks when you go out, try limiting yourself to two,” she suggests. “Any reduction in drinking is going to be beneficial to your health.” Keyes notes that even people with alcohol dependence may find they can regain control without having to quit entirely. “For a long time, people assumed that quitting was the only solution if you drank too much, but that’s not necessarily true for everyone,” she says. “New approaches, some of which include cognitive behavioral therapy, can help people understand their drinking habits and develop healthier limits.”



Fermilab scientists celebrate the activation of a new particle detector.

A big step forward for particle physics

After nearly a decade of planning, a new particle detector that Columbia physicists helped to design and build was recently activated at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory (or Fermilab) in Illinois. The highly sensitive instrument, called the Short-Baseline Near Detector, can spot ghostly particles called neutrinos, which are ubiquitous yet notoriously difficult to observe. The team is particularly focused on uncovering new types of neutrinos, which could provide clues to understanding the universe’s birth, its current expansion, and dark matter. “We are about to look where no one has ever looked before,” says Columbia professor and team leader Georgia Karagiorgi ’08GSAS. “Opportunities for new discoveries abound.”



The Short-Baseline Near Detector is lowered into place in 2023.

How polarization punishes open minds

Open-mindedness is often celebrated as a virtue, but in today's hyper-polarized political climate, even the act of engaging with opposing viewpoints can come at a social cost. New research by Mohamed A. Hussein, an assistant professor at Columbia Business School, reveals that people tend to look down on members of their own political party who show curiosity about their opponents' ideas, such as by reading their online posts or articles. Strikingly, this judgment persists regardless of the ideas' substance or merit.

"So it's not about the information itself; it's about who it's coming from," says Hussein. "It's really about an us-versus-them mentality and the negative stereotypes that people have about the opposing group, regardless of what they're saying."

The findings may hold a clue as to what is causing the yawning political gap in the US and why it is growing wider. If people are scared that being receptive to or engaging with the other party will hurt their reputation among their in-party peers, Hussein says, they will likely refrain from doing so.



Why a NYC-area earthquake punched above its weight



When a magnitude 4.8 earthquake struck northern New Jersey's Tewksbury Township last April, it shook not only the ground but the region's sense of security. The quake was the biggest to hit the New York City metro area since 1884 and generated stronger, more far-reaching shock waves than would have been expected based on the depth and magnitude of the fault slippage. More

than 150 buildings in New York City were damaged, and trembling was felt as far away as Maine and Virginia. Now a team of researchers that includes Columbia seismologist Won-Young Kim may have discovered why. They say that as a result of the fault line's unusual geometry, the energy produced by the earthquake did not travel straight up to the surface, as is typical, but first headed downward, where it bounced off a layer of dense rock near the Earth's mantle and emanated back upward in all directions, disturbing a wider area. The scientists are now studying the previously unmapped fault line in more detail to assess future risk.

STUDY HALL RESEARCH BRIEFS

Genes gone wild

Columbia biochemist Samuel Sternberg '07CC and graduate student Stephen Tang have discovered

that bacteria possess free-floating genes outside their chromosomes, challenging long-standing assumptions about how DNA is organized and stored. They are now investigating whether similarly mobile, autonomous genes may exist in humans.

Sniff test for dementia A simple smell and memory test can predict Alzheimer's risk as effectively as costly brain imaging, offering hope for earlier diagnosis and intervention, according to clinical research led by Columbia psychiatrist and neurologist Davangere P. Devanand.

Sweetgum smog surprise While urban tree-planting initiatives offer many benefits, overreliance on oaks and sweetgums can actually worsen air quality, according to a study by Columbia atmospheric chemist Róisín Commane. The trees release volatile compounds called isoprenes, which on hot summer days combine with vehicle emissions to produce ground-level ozone, a key component of smog.

Power up your bandage Columbia engineers led by Samuel Sia have created a high-tech bandage that generates an electric field to accelerate healing in chronic wounds, such as diabetic foot ulcers. Activated with a simple drop of water, the bandage speeds healing by up to 30 percent, encouraging blood-vessel growth and reducing inflammation.



Cosmic cradle New research led by Columbia astronomer Jane Huang reveals that planets can form in more extreme environments than previously known, including in the high-radiation backyards of massive stars.

The silent GDP killer Mental illness costs the US economy more than \$280 billion annually in lost labor productivity and reduced consumer spending, which is similar to the impact of a typical recession, finds Columbia Business School economist Boaz Abramson. His research suggests that expanding access to mental-health services would fuel growth and ultimately save taxpayer dollars.

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YOUR ALUMNI
CONNECTION



Who's Winning the Rat Race?

NYC Council member Shaun Abreu '14CC cleans up his home district

New York has drug-free zones, gun-free zones, car-free zones, and phone-free zones. But rat-free zones? The idea might seem impossible to anyone who has run the gauntlet of swollen plastic garbage bags on the city's sidewalks and observed the well-fed creatures darting in all directions. One estimate puts their number at three million. But if Shaun Abreu '14CC has his way, the rat bacchanalia will be wrapped up soon.

Abreu, who is in his second term on the New York City Council and is chair of the sanitation committee, represents District 7, which covers West Harlem, Manhattanville, and Morning-side, Hamilton, and Washington Heights. In 2022, the city council passed Abreu's bill calling for "rat mitigation zones" in areas where rat complaints to 311 are the highest, including in District 7. Abreu wants his ward to be a model of mitigation for the entire city.

But how? Abreu doesn't like poison (neither do the rats), which has never worked as a

long-term solution and which poses a threat to other urban wildlife (Flaco, the Eurasian eagle-owl who fatally crashed into an Upper West Side building last winter, had high levels of rodenticide in his system). Instead, Abreu's plan relies on two main strategies: containerization and contraception.

"Our trash bags do not belong on the street as a rat buffet," Abreu says. "They belong in containers." A fleet of European-style, rat-proof curbside bins, eight feet long and meant to be shared by residents, have been deployed in West Harlem from 143rd to 153rd Street, and Abreu says that rat sightings there have gone down by more than 50 percent. "And you know what? Next spring, from 110th to 155th, including the Columbia area, everything on the street is going to be in a container. We may lose some parking spots, but it's for the public good."

That's what Abreu likes best about the job: showing his constituents that government works. "I like to make it clear to people

through examples,” he says. “When people wake up and see that their trash is gone, when they wake up and they see that crossing guard on the corner helping their child get to school, when they wake up and see the roads getting paved — that’s government working.”

Abreu, thirty-four, hopes to add “when they wake up and see no rats” to his litany. This past fall, he introduced legislation for a pilot project in District 7 that would dispense contraceptive pellets to rats. “Two rats in a given year can produce fifteen thousand descendants,” says Abreu, who is as conversant in rat stats as he is in the numbers of his beloved Yankees. “And I can tell you this: birth control works in a lab setting. We’ve seen Brussels use it for pigeons. Other cities have seen success as well. We now have an opportunity to try it out in our city.”

The son of Dominican immigrants, Abreu grew up on West 161st Street in Washington Heights. When he was young, his family was evicted from their apartment. His parents lost their jobs, and when Abreu was in fourth grade at PS 4, he failed the state reading exam and was held back. But the family kept pushing. Abreu received support from his teachers. His mother got a job at Zabar’s and his father became a janitor at Port Authority Bus Terminal — and a proud union member. “When a labor union asks me to do something, I jump, because labor is fighting for working families,” Abreu says. “I was able to get braces as a kid. Why? Because my dad had amazing health insurance. My mom is a type 1 diabetic,

and my dad’s union made it possible to get affordable insulin. Labor unions matter, and that’s why New York City is a union town.”

In high school, Abreu was accepted into Columbia’s Double Discovery program, which helps low-income students from Washington Heights and Harlem prepare for college. “I got subject-specific tutoring and learned how to take standardized tests. I also learned about the city and how government can make things better for families.” Abreu got in to Columbia, where he majored in political science. In his junior year, he was the campaign manager for Mark Levine, his District 7 predecessor at City Hall (Levine is now Manhattan borough president).

After college, Abreu earned a law degree from Tulane and moved back to New York to become a tenants’ rights lawyer, helping families facing eviction. Wanting to do more for his community, he ran for city council in 2021 and won. In 2023, Abreu fought successfully to allocate \$40 million to cover legal fees for residents facing eviction.

As someone who is “married to politics,” Abreu has devoted himself to “helping the people I grew up with,” whether they’re dealing with unscrupulous landlords or fecund rodents. He insists that government can put a lid on the city’s problems, even its hairiest ones. “How New York City manages trash in District 7 will determine how we manage trash — and rats — citywide,” Abreu says. “We’re showing the way forward.”

— Paul Hond

Wing Man

Daniel Ksepka '07GSAS showcases an influential stamp



As an avian paleontologist, Daniel Ksepka '07GSAS specializes in esoteric subjects like the evolution of diving in extinct penguin species. “I would consider myself probably the world’s expert on fossil penguins,” he says, “but that’s only because there are few people who study them.” But Ksepka is equally passionate about promoting the natural world to the public, and as the curator of science at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut, he recently turned his attention to a more common waterbird: the duck.



“Arctic Watch,” a portrait of spectacled eiders by Adam Grimm, placed first in the 2025 Federal Duck Stamp art contest.

Ksepka’s latest show, *Conservation Through the Arts: Celebrating the Federal Duck Stamp*, on view through February 9, is dedicated to the artwork of the Federal Duck Stamp, a little-known but wildly successful conservation program. This annual pass to hunt waterfowl in the United States — originally with a face value of one dollar, today twenty-five — has raised over \$1.2 billion for wetland and wildlife conservation since its introduction in 1934. “It’s not a postage stamp but a revenue stamp,” explains Ksepka. Each year hundreds of artists submit original renderings of North American ducks, swans, and geese, hoping their work will be featured.

The stamps are bought not only by hunters but by stamp collectors, nature lovers, and wildlife-art aficionados. “It’s less than three square inches,” says Ksepka, “but has conserved more than 6.5 million acres while helping bird populations rebound from overhunting.”



ASK AN ALUM:
HOW TO PLAN
A PERFECT
WEDDING

Jove Meyer '11GS stumbled into the wedding business in college, when a fellow Columbian asked him to help organize her big day. Since then, he's become one of New York's most sought-after wedding planners.

What exactly does a wedding planner do?

The better question is, what *doesn't* a wedding planner do? It's an all-encompassing job that a lot of people don't understand. We wear so many hats, doing everything from sourcing vendors to managing emotions. We're part project manager, part creative director, part therapist. One of my specialties is event design, which is not something that all wedding planners do.

My team and I start the process by scheduling a "date" with the couple: getting to know their love story as well as their preferences, budget, guest count, and expectations. We then reach out to anywhere from twelve to thirty vendors before sending a short list to the couple and helping them make decisions. After negoti-

ating contracts — in a sense, we're also part lawyer — we plan the timeline. There's a skill set to creating the flow of a wedding: how the day should unfold and when the key moments happen. During the event, we manage the vendor, couple, and guest arrivals as well as the delivery, setup, and breakdown of all items and equipment.

You've been in this business since 2008. How has wedding culture changed since then?



Flowers and table settings at a wedding organized by Jove Meyer.

It's evolved dramatically. When I got started, marriage equality hadn't yet passed, so it wasn't legal for me to participate in the activity that I was providing for other people. In many ways, I think queer weddings have pushed the industry toward more authentic celebrations rather than a formula you should follow. The younger generation is reclaiming weddings, and they're frequently less

traditional. If the couple isn't religious, they're not getting married in a church. If they don't want a cake, they won't have one.

A lot of couples are also reevaluating the heteronormative and male-dominant culture of weddings: how the father walks the daughter down the aisle, dances with her, gives a speech. Not everyone has a father, and not every wedding has a daughter. I've seen couples bend those traditions in ways that are meaningful to them.

Which traditions do you feel are particularly passé, and what's currently trending?

My clients haven't done a garter toss in like fifteen years. We haven't seen a bouquet toss in a very long time either. All-white color schemes are gone, including the assumption that wedding attire needs to be white. Formality is out and fun is in.

As for current trends, we're seeing couples embrace

more color and patterns, and people are really obsessed with bows at the moment. People are also obsessed with Italian vibes, from spritzes to espresso martinis to pasta courses to millefoglie cakes — I think the second season of *The White Lotus* has had a major influence.

What are some of the most unusual weddings you've planned?

If you're looking for a non-traditional wedding, that's where we thrive. We once did a Halloween masquerade wedding. We've also done a five-hundred-person music-festival-themed wedding with band after band and passed vegan food instead of a sit-down dinner. Another time, we did a *Star Wars* wedding where the couple and their wedding party all dressed up as characters. Their first "dance" was a choreographed lightsaber fight.

The term "wedding-industrial complex" is often used to describe the high costs of a wedding and the pressure to make it elaborate. Do you think that's a fair criticism?

It's tough. Once I was working with a client who was living in the land of "we need everything, and everything has to be perfect." I was happy to provide all of that, but her mom sat us down and said, "I want to make sure we don't lose focus that at the end of the day, this is about the love in the room." That really stuck with me, because it can be easy to lose sight of the larger goal when you have

the option to customize and upgrade every single component. Pinterest, TikTok, and Instagram have made the pressure worse. Before social media, you didn't really know what was possible. So I do understand the criticism. At the same time, *because* there are so many options for personaliza-

tion, I think it's a beautiful thing that if you want to source all-pink glassware because it makes you happy, someone can do that for you. Do any upgrades or design details guarantee a happy marriage? No, they do not. There is no correlation between how much money you spend on your



wedding and the success of your marriage. But what I love about the industry is that so many niche artisans and creatives are able to get work because people have expanded their vocabulary and understanding of what a wedding can be. That's exciting to me.

— Julia Joy

An Uncommon Composer

Joan Tower '78GSAS is still playing at a fast tempo

From her longtime home in New York's Hudson Valley, composer Joan Tower '78GSAS reflects on her early years at Columbia.

"We were pioneers, although we didn't know it at the time," she says, describing her experience in 1964 as one of only two women doctoral students in music composition and theory. Studying with now legendary faculty — Otto Luening, Vladimir Ussachevsky, Mario Davidovsky, and Chou Wen-chung '54GSAS — Tower spent more than a decade in and around Columbia, composing and performing, before, she says, "I was finally" awarded a doctorate of musical arts in 1978.

Since then, Tower has established herself as one of the most revered and performed contemporary composers of her day. A three-time Grammy winner and the first woman to win the coveted Grawemeyer Award in composition, Tower has also won a global audience. Her *Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman*, a work that premiered in 1987 with a nod to Aaron Copland's 1942 *Fanfare for the Common Man*, helped establish her reputation. Over several decades, the fanfares grew to six movements, dedicated, in Tower's words, to "women who take risks and are adventurous." To date, more than five hundred

orchestras and ensembles have performed them.

At eighty-six, Tower isn't losing momentum. For many years she has been producing a steady stream of works for ensembles of every size and type, and recently she has worked on a concerto for saxophonist Steven Banks, a composition for the Cassat String Quartet, and an orchestral piece for Yale University.



As a pianist, Tower has performed widely, especially with the Da Capo Chamber Players, a storied contemporary-music ensemble that she cofounded in 1969. She is also the Asher B. Edelman Professor in the Arts at Bard College, where she started teaching in 1972. Tower chuckles while saying that music composition "can't really be taught" but adds that she has enjoyed coaching young composers as they develop their own voices.

While she and many others yearn for the day when "women composers" are more widely referred to simply as "composers," Tower acknowledges the huge progress made recently by women in her profession, particularly in the years since the 2020 centennial celebrations of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, securing women's right to vote. Tower and eighteen other women were commissioned that year by the New York Philharmonic for the much lauded "Project 19," which spotlighted established composers like Tower as well as rising talents like Mary Kouyoumdjian '21GSAS and Nina C. Young '17GSAS.

Tower grew up mostly in New Rochelle, New York, but spent part of her childhood in South America, where she was entranced by Bolivian rhythms, particularly of folk percussion instruments. No surprise, then, that her music is often praised for its rhythmic vitality. She describes herself as different from the "uptown music intellectuals" who frequented Dodge Hall during her Columbia days, and while she expresses great respect for the intellect and accomplishments of her academic contemporaries, her own focus has been on creating and performing more accessible music. "I've always been more interested in making music than talking about it," she says.

— Helen S. Paxton '78GSAS

New and Upcoming Films from Alumni

Columbia writers, directors, producers, and actors are making waves at festivals and in theaters



A Complete Unknown

James Mangold '99SOA directed this Bob Dylan biopic, which stars former Columbia student Timothée Chalamet. The film portrays the legendary singer-songwriter as he makes a controversial shift from acoustic to electric.



A Different Man

Gabriel Mayer '17CC, the head of film at the indie production company Killer Films, produced this Gotham Award-winning thriller about an actor who receives a new face.



Hold Your Breath

Karrie Crouse '11SOA wrote and codirected this dust-bowl thriller, which stars former Columbia student Ebon Moss-Bachrach as a menacing preacher.



April

The winner of the special jury prize at the Venice International Film Festival, this Georgian film from writer-director Dea Kulumbegashvili '18SOA tells the story of an ob-gyn who performs illegal abortions.



Transamazonia

This drama set in the Amazon jungle stars Jeremy Xido '94CC as an American missionary who believes his daughter has healing powers.



A Real Pain

Two cousins visit Poland to honor their Holocaust-survivor grandmother in this dramedy, which was executive-produced by Jennifer Westin '06SOA.



The Room Next Door

This Pedro Almodóvar-directed film starring Tilda Swinton and Julianne Moore is based on the 2020 novel *What Are You Going Through*, by National Book Award winner Sigrid Nunez '72BC, '75SOA.



The Luckiest Man in America

Maggie Briggs '19SOA cowrote this film based on the true story of Michael Larson, an Ohio man who beat the game show *Press Your Luck* in 1984. Daniel Ragussis '05SOA served as an associate producer.



Sugarcane

Julian Brave NoiseCat '15CC won the directing award for US documentary at the Sundance Film Festival as the codirector of *Sugarcane*, a film about historic abuse in Canada's Indian residential-school system.



Nickel Boys

Plan B Entertainment copresident Dede Gardner '90CC executive-produced this adaptation of Colson Whitehead's novel of the same name, about two Black teens sent to a reform school in the Jim Crow South.



War Game

This documentary thriller, in which American officials simulate a response to a hypothetical military coup after a disputed election, was codirected by Tony Gerber '95SOA.

A COMPLETE UNKNOWN: A REAL PAIN: HOLD YOUR BREATH: SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES; TRANSAMAZONIA: THE PARTY FILM SALES; NICKEL BOYS: AMAZON MGM STUDIOS; SUGARCANE: EMILY KASSIE / SUGARCANE FILM LLC; WAR GAME: THORSTEN THELTON; THE ROOM NEXT DOOR: VIB MEDIA; APRIL: NETROGRAPH PICTURES; THE LUCKIEST MAN IN AMERICA: IFC FILMS; A DIFFERENT MAN: Z24



Rogsbert Phillips-Reed (right) visits with a patient.

Driving Better Outcomes for Breast-Cancer Patients

Rogsbert Phillips-Reed '77VPS takes her career-long fight for women's health on the road

In her forty-plus years as a breast-cancer surgeon, Rogsbert Phillips-Reed '77VPS has always been troubled by how little most people know about the disease. “No matter what walks of life women come from, the level of knowledge about breast cancer is frequently just not there,” she says. Despite advances in research — some of which she’s contributed to through clinical trials — it frustrates her that so many people still die of breast cancer. “A lot of women don’t come forward when they feel a lump,” Phillips-Reed says, “because there’s a significant amount of fear surrounding treatment.”

Throughout her career, the Atlanta-based physician has been on a mission to ease those fears and improve patients’ health both through Metro Surgical Associates, her private practice, and Sisters by Choice (SBC), a nonprofit promoting breast-cancer awareness and education. SBC also operates a mobile breast clinic that provides screenings for underserved people across the region.

Often parked beside community landmarks like schools, churches, and grocery stores, the roaming four-room facility — a converted eighteen-wheeler — is the first of its kind in Georgia. SBC’s clinic exclusively serves uninsured patients in a state that ranks forty-eighth in percentage of residents with health insurance. Breast exams and mammograms are available on-site by appointment, and patients requiring further evaluation are referred to partner hospitals. If treatment is needed, the organization guides patients toward financial-assistance programs. “I’m committed to following up with these patients. We make sure our mobile unit runs just like a doctor’s office,” says Phillips-Reed.

Before the pandemic, SBC’s mobile clinic served a thousand patients per year. Phillips-Reed is working to add staff to accommodate that volume while expanding the service’s geographic range. In October, the clinic traveled outside metro Atlanta for

the first time: over a hundred miles southwest to Clay County, where more than a quarter of the sparse population lives below the poverty line and only one doctor, Karen Kinsell '93PH, '93VPS, serves the entire region. Eventually, Phillips-Reed hopes to acquire a second vehicle, visit more counties, and team up with more funders and medical providers to support rural cancer patients in coming to Atlanta for treatment.

“In Atlanta, we have a lot of resources — it’s really about letting people know what the resources are,” she says. In small counties like Clay, where the nearest hospital or mammogram machine is more than an hour’s drive away, “We can make a major difference because they’re starting from ground zero.”

To spread awareness of the importance of breast-cancer screening and new approaches to treatment, SBC has held an annual conference since 1990. It also runs a network of support groups, as well as a yearly survivors’ celebration and a 5K fundraiser. The name Sisters by Choice, notes Phillips-Reed, was suggested by her patients: “They did not choose to get breast cancer, but they came together to fight breast cancer.”

SBC funds its activities through donations from individuals, local businesses, and civic organizations. Apart from one administrative employee and the mobile clinic’s paid nurses and mammogram technicians, it relies on the efforts of volunteers. “I feel fortunate because the community has embraced Sisters by Choice,” says Phillips-Reed. “We are small, but we can do what we do simply because of all the support that we get.”

Phillips-Reed’s career is all the more remarkable considering she almost didn’t become a doctor. While earning a master’s in chemistry, she took her adviser’s suggestion to apply to medical school, but by the time she heard back, she’d settled into a research job. “I sat down to write a letter to Columbia

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saying thank you but no thank you,” she recalls.

Something stopped her. “I could not write that letter,” she says. “It was an opportunity for an African-American woman to go to an Ivy League school. It was an opportunity I could not give up. It turned out it was probably one of the best decisions that I made.”

After getting her MD from Columbia, Phillips-Reed returned to Atlanta to become the second woman — and the first Black woman — to graduate from Emory University’s surgery program.

Now, after decades in the field, Phillips-Reed isn’t slowing down. She rises most mornings at 4:30 and performs surgeries three days



The Sisters by Choice mobile clinic.

a week at Metro Surgical Associates, which has offices in downtown Atlanta and the nearby city of Lithonia. “It’s really a busy practice,” she says. “I keep telling people I’ve got to develop my exit plan, and my patients are saying, ‘You can’t retire.’”

Over the years, Phillips-Reed has decompressed with tennis (until her knees rebelled), golf (a shared pastime with her husband before his death in 2020), and visits with her granddaughter.

What really keeps her going, though, is using her skills as a surgeon. “I love being in the operating room,” she says, “because right there, it’s definitive — I know that what I do is a major part of how that patient is going to do down the line.”

— Nicole Estvanik Taylor



Fissure (2024) at the Jewish Museum of Venice.

Dental Arts



Abstract sculptor Jonathan Prince ’80DM draws inspiration from an unlikely muse: his short-lived career as an oral and maxillofacial surgeon.

“Being a dentist is very much like being an artist,” says Prince, who like his father, Ivin B. Prince ’48DM, graduated from Columbia’s College of Dental Medicine. “You get to sculpt all the time. Throughout my body of work, there are hints of my love of science and the human form.”

Prince quit dentistry in 1986 and now runs his sculpture practice out of a ten-thousand-square-foot converted dairy farm in the Berkshires. His works include *Liquid State*, a series of stainless-steel installations reminiscent of teeth, and *Flow State*, which contrasts smooth and jagged surfaces. A steel sculpture from *Flow State* titled *Fissure* recently appeared at the Jewish Museum of Venice as part of *The Contours of Otherness*, an exhibition exploring migration and identity timed to coincide with the Venice Biennale. “The piece represents a fissure in the earth or a separation between the sides of oneself,” says Prince. “The idea is that beauty is in the imperfections and breaks, not the perfect surfaces.”



Baking Connections

Estelle Sohne '04LAW mixes cake and culture

Several years ago, Estelle Sohne '04LAW, a former litigation associate and full-time mother of three, was looking for her next career move when she had a eureka moment at the grocery store. “I walked down an aisle where one side had international olive oils and the other had traditional American baking mixes,” she recalls. “So I decided to bridge the two sides.”

In 2022, Sohne founded Flour & Olive, a line of cake mix designed for baking with olive oil. “Olive-oil cakes tend to be moist and soft, and they can be made dairy-free or vegan,” says Sohne. The mix has been a hit with foodies. This past spring, the brand, based in Kirkland, Washington, was honored with a soft gold award from the Specialty Food Association.

Sohne says that like wine, “olive oil has terroir. It can be fruity, nutty, peppery, or buttery” and offers an excellent “canvas” for different flavors. Flour & Olive offers four varieties — chocolate, vanilla, almond, and ginger — and its website includes over seventy international cake recipes to use with the mix, for everything from Italian tortas to Algerian mouskoutchous.

The company’s global character is inspired by Sohne’s multicultural family: her husband, Yannick Carapito '03LAW, is French, and she grew up in a mixed-race household in Accra, Ghana. “Our logo is based on the Ghanaian symbol for welcome,” she says. “It’s made up of connected olives and olive-flower blossoms — a celebration of cultural diversity and an embrace of our shared humanity.”

NEWSMAKERS

● Michigan congresswoman **Elissa Slotkin '03SIPA**, a member of the House of Representatives since 2019, was elected to the Senate in November. California congresswoman **Sara Jacobs '12SIPA** won reelection to the House.

● **Alicia Graf Mack '03GS**, the director of Juilliard’s dance division, was selected as the next artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.



● At the 2024 Emmys, *Shōgun*, the historical drama co-created by **Justin Marks '02CC**, swept up eighteen awards including best drama series.

Hacks, co-created by **Lucia Aniello '04CC** (left), scored the Emmy for outstanding comedy series as well as a screen-

writing award for Aniello. **Joanna Rothkopf '14JRN** and **Tim Carvell '95CC** won as writers of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, while **Ramin Hedayati '02CC**, co-executive producer of *The Daily Show*, took home a prize for outstanding talk series. At the Creative Arts Emmys, **Leah Katznelson '02CC** won in the costume-design category for *Feud: Capote vs. The Swans*, and at the News and Documentary Emmys, **Noah Amir Arjomand '18GSAS** won for outstanding social-issue documentary for *Eat Your Catfish*.

● *McNeal*, a play written by **Ayad Akhtar '02SOA**, opened on Broadway this past fall, with Robert Downey Jr. starring as a renowned novelist grappling with the age of artificial intelligence.

● Ugandan journalist **Musinguzi Blanshe '20JRN** won the African



Investigative Journalist of the Year award for his series on Congolese rainforest-timber trafficking.

● Venture capitalist **Tanvi Chaturvedi '14BUS**, human-trafficking consultant **Shobana Powell '14SW**, and social-justice advocate **Lindsay Schubiner '07BC** were included in the 2024–25 cohort of Obama Foundation USA Leaders.

● *Creation Lake*, a spy novel by **Rachel Kushner '01SOA**, was short-listed for the 2024 Booker Prize, a prestigious annual award for fiction.

● A solo exhibition dedicated to the work of sculptor and performance artist **Smita Sen '16CC** opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami on November 6 and runs until April 6.

● BlocPower founder **Donnel Baird '13BUS**, NASA scientist **Peter Kalmus '08GSAS**, and UC Santa Barbara energy researcher **Leah Stokes '09SIPA** were included on *Forbes*’s inaugural list of “superstar” sustainability leaders.

● *Say Nothing*, the 2019 nonfiction book by **Patrick Radden Keefe '99CC** about an infamous murder in Troubles-era Northern Ireland, was adapted into a limited series of the same name. The show premiered on FX and Hulu on November 14.

● **April Kim Tonin '99GSAS**, an artist and the head of education at the Frick Collection, illustrated *How to Cook Everything Kids*, the new children’s cookbook from food journalist and Columbia public-health lecturer Mark Bittman.



ALEXIS ABRAMSON NAMED DEAN OF CLIMATE SCHOOL

Alexis Abramson, a prominent engineering scholar and sustainable-energy expert, has been appointed as the new dean of Columbia Climate School.

Abramson joins Columbia after serving as dean of Dartmouth's Thayer School of Engineering since 2019. In that role, she spearheaded initiatives that strengthened faculty recruitment, experiential-learning opportunities, research, graduate programs, and entrepreneurship, while also fostering an inclusive campus community.

A mechanical engineer by training, Abramson has deep expertise in developing and commercializing sustainable-energy technologies to combat climate change. Before her tenure at Dartmouth, she was a professor at Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland, where she directed a

major energy-research institute. Her own research has focused on designing and synthesizing nanomaterials for applications in renewable energy.

Abramson holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Tufts University and a PhD in mechanical engineering from the University of California, Berkeley. During the Obama administration, she served as chief scientist and manager of the emerging-technologies team at the Department of Energy's Building Technologies Office, overseeing investments in energy-efficient building innovations.

The Climate School, launched in 2020, serves as a hub of interdisciplinary climate research and education across the University. It recently launched a new master's degree program, the MS in climate, whose first cohort will begin classes in fall 2025.

CAMPUS COLLABORATIVE PROMOTES DIALOGUE, INCLUSIVENESS

Last semester, the University launched the Campus Collaborative, an initiative aimed at promoting cross-cultural dialogue and other community-building exchanges among students, faculty, and staff in order to foster an equitable and welcoming environment for all.

"The effort has a single goal: to embrace inclusive pluralism while rejecting discrimination and harassment as antithetical to our values and our identity," said interim president Katrina Armstrong upon announcing the initiative.

The University has also created the Campus Collaborative Fund to provide resources for new programming, some developed and led by students, that encourages "free expression, open inquiry, and generous debate."

To learn more, visit campuscollaborative.columbia.edu.

ROY AND DIANA VAGELOS MAKE \$400 MILLION GIFT

Columbia benefactors P. Roy Vagelos '54VPS and Diana Vagelos '55BC recently donated \$400 million to the medical school for biomedical-science research and education. The gift is the single largest ever to the school and, taken together with their previous giving, establishes the Vagelos as the most generous donors in the history of the University.

A significant portion of the gift will expand the mission of the Vagelos-funded Institute for Basic Biomedical Science, created last year to foster cutting-edge research bridging fundamental biology and clinical practice. The institute will now play a pivotal role in uniting Columbia's research efforts across basic sciences, clinical departments, and medical and graduate education programs, expanding University collaborations that harness recent breakthroughs and new technologies.

The donation also supports the ongoing construction of the Vagelos Innovation Laboratories, an eight-story biomedical-research facility rising on Columbia's medical campus in Washington Heights. In addition, the gift will advance the



medical school's pioneering efforts in cell engineering and gene therapy — fields with the potential to revolutionize treatments for blood, immune, and metabolic disorders, as well as cancer and neurological, inflammatory, and cardiovascular diseases.

“It is truly awe-inspiring to envision the discoveries and new knowledge this gift will enable, in world-class laboratories bolstered by the resources and innovative structure of the Vagelos

Institute,” wrote interim Columbia president Katrina Armstrong and interim medical-school dean James McKiernan '93VPS in a joint statement.

The Vagelos' long-standing support has already had a profound impact. Their 2017 gift of \$250 million, which included \$150 million earmarked for scholarships, allowed Columbia's medical school to become the first in the United States to offer debt-free education, inspiring a national movement to eliminate medical-school debt. In recognition of their contributions, the school was renamed the Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons that year.

MICHEL SADELAIN TO LEAD NEW INITIATIVE IN CELL ENGINEERING AND THERAPY



Michel Sadelain, a renowned immunologist and cancer researcher, has been appointed the inaugural director of the Columbia Initiative in Cell Engineering and Therapy (CICET) and the director of the Cancer Cell Therapy Initiative at Columbia's Herbert Irving Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Sadelain, who comes to Columbia from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, is a pioneer of CAR T-cell immunotherapy, a revolutionary treatment that reprograms patients' T cells into “living drugs” to combat cancer. His research laid the groundwork for the first FDA-approved CAR T-cell therapies for blood cancers in 2017.

At CICET, Sadelain will collaborate with other Columbia scientists to explore new applications for cell engineering, targeting other cancers as well as neurodegenerative diseases, autoimmune disorders, and transplant-related conditions. The initiative will recruit leading scientists; enhance Columbia's research infrastructure; and integrate trailblazing work in fields like bioengineering, systems biology, and artificial intelligence.

SCIENTISTS WIN \$41M GRANT TO ENGINEER OBESITY CURE

A team of researchers led by Columbia biomedical engineer Ken Shepard has been awarded a grant of up to \$41 million from the federal Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health to tackle obesity and diabetes with an implantable device they are developing. The thin, wireless device will contain engineered cells that produce appetite-regulating peptides similar to those found in popular weight-loss drugs, removing the need for injections and reducing side effects. Shepard is collaborating on the project with Columbia diabetes experts Judith Korner '87GSAS, '93VPS and Rudolph Leibel, as well as researchers at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, Penn, and the biotech company Immusoft.



ZHENG WINS BIG IN TEXAS SHOWDOWN

Third-year tennis player Michael Zheng became Columbia's first NCAA tennis singles champion of the modern era by defeating Michigan State's Ozan Baris 6-2, 4-6, 6-2 at the national tournament in Waco, Texas, on November 24. "Honestly, it's a huge relief," said Zheng, a New Jersey native and three-time all-American who was the runner-up at last spring's NCAA Championships. "It feels amazing to finally get it done and get the title for myself and Columbia."

NEW 'CHART' INITIATIVE TO ADDRESS HEALTH IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The University has launched a new center to advance climate and health research. The center, called Climate and Health: Action and Research for Transformational Change (CHART), will bring together experts in epidemiology, statistics, sociology, and many other fields to develop evidence-based solutions to climate-related health threats.

Led by public-health professors Marianthi-Anna Kioumourtzoglou, Kiros Berhane, and Jeffrey Shaman '03GSAS, CHART is backed by a \$4.2 million grant from the National Institute on Aging. Participating researchers will study how co-occurring climate risks, such as extreme heat and flooding, affect human health and evaluate potential interventions, including improved housing quality. By collaborating with local communities, clinicians, and policymakers, CHART aims to transform scientific insights into equitable, actionable solutions.

"The most significant current threat to global public health is climate change," says Kioumourtzoglou. "It is essential to develop reliable and relevant scientific evidence and understanding to inform appropriate policies and interventions."

EJ ECKLES / COLUMBIA ATHLETICS

INSPIRATIONS AT THE BRISTAL

AN EXCLUSIVE PROGRAM FOR EARLY-STAGE MEMORY LOSS

PROGRAMMING WITH PURPOSE

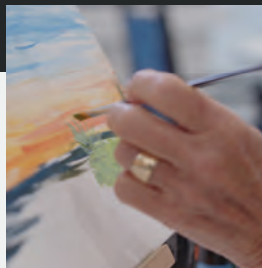
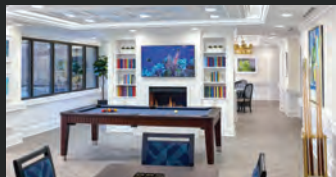
The Bristol at York Avenue is proud to introduce Inspirations, a one-of-a-kind program designed to support those facing early-stage memory loss. Through carefully curated and individualized programming, we'll celebrate your strengths, encourage your spirit and help you find your confidence. It is our true purpose to help you rediscover yours.

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COLUMBIA ESTABLISHES CENTER FOR RARE KIDNEY DISEASES

Columbia's medical school has established the David Koch Jr. Glomerular Kidney Center to improve diagnostics and treatments for glomerular diseases, rare conditions that hinder the kidneys' ability to filter waste and excess fluids from the bloodstream.

Supported by a \$20 million gift from the David Koch Jr. Foundation, the new center will advance clinical research, physician training, and patient care in this area, with a particular focus on finding effective therapies. The center will be codirected by Gerald Appel and Andrew Bomback '03VPS, both Columbia nephrologists recognized for pioneering research on glomerular diseases.

"While significant progress has been made in diagnosing and treating glomerular diseases, there is still much work to be done," says Appel.

The Columbia center will support collaborative research across the fields of epidemiology, biostatistics, structural biology, and genomics, with the hope of fueling new insights into disease mechanisms and potential treatments. It will also expand access to specialized care for patients with glomerular diseases, including those referred from around the globe, and enhance professional education by training new specialists through a dedicated fellowship program.



SCHOOL OF GENERAL STUDIES GETS NEW FUNDS TO SUPPORT FINANCIAL AID

Columbia University is making a major investment in its School of General Studies, dedicating \$30 million to the school's endowment over the next three years to bolster student financial aid. The new investment, structured as matching funds, is designed to encourage additional donations from future supporters, further amplifying aid for GS

students. Additionally, the funding will support the launch of a new initiative, the NYC Scholars program, which aims to create an affordable pathway to GS for high-achieving local community-college students.

The University has also announced that it has commenced planning for a residential hall that would be the first ever dedicated to GS students; Kikka Hanazawa '00GS, a Columbia Trustee, is leading an effort to raise \$20 million in alumni donations for the project.



LIONS MAKE HISTORY AS IVY LEAGUE CHAMPIONS

The Columbia Lions clinched their first Ivy League football title in sixty-three years with a hard-fought 17-9 victory over Cornell on November 23.

In windy conditions that grounded early passing attacks, Columbia relied on senior running back Joey Giorgi, who powered his way to a career-high 165 rushing yards on twenty-nine carries. First-year quarterback Caleb Sanchez eventually found his rhythm, throwing for 221 yards, including a seventy-three-yard strike to junior wide receiver Ethan Hebb that set up a pivotal third-quarter touchdown. As it has all season, Columbia's defense dominated, tallying three sacks and two interceptions and holding Cornell to its fewest points of the season.

With a 7-3 overall record, the Lions share the Ivy title with Harvard and Dartmouth, as all three teams finished the season 5-2 in league play.

"What a tremendous feeling," said first-year head coach Jon Poppe, whose seven wins are the most by a rookie Lions coach since 1899. "Just a tremendous job by all the seniors, coaches, and staff."

Don't Be a Stranger

By Susan Minot '83SOA (Knopf)

When Ivy Cooper meets Ansel Fleming, both are fresh from recent traumas — in Ivy's case a bitter divorce, in Ansel's a seven-year prison sentence for drug trafficking. Both are hungry for physical connection, a need that they satisfy almost immediately. But what comes next? In her latest novel, *Don't Be a Stranger*, Susan Minot '83SOA explores the fallout from an unlikely affair and its profound impact on her heroine.

Ivy, a writer, and Ansel, a singer-songwriter, meet at a dinner party thrown by a mutual friend. But aside from this shared social

group, their lives couldn't have less in common.

Ivy is fifty-two, a single mother to an eight-year-old boy, and her world is full of elementary-school functions, playdates, and social obligations. Ansel, two decades younger, is quiet, enigmatic, and difficult to reach,

both literally and emotionally. "Can I ask you something personal?" Ivy says to him after an intense sexual encounter. "You can always try," he responds. The implication, of course, is that she shouldn't get her hopes up.

Those hopes become the biggest wedge between them. Ivy and Ansel begin a sporadic affair, meeting for the occasional rendezvous at Ansel's apartment. He is clear from the start that he doesn't want a relationship, that this is all he has to give. But the longer the affair continues, the more invested Ivy becomes, until she can think of nothing else. "In the days after she saw him," Minot writes, "his face would sit on the inside of her skull, and she would

find herself looking at the world imagining how he was seeing it."

Minot writes searingly about lust and loss, about intimacy and obsession, and about the devastation of unrequited feelings. She captures perfectly the nagging toll of romantic infatuation, recognizable to anyone who has had an overwhelming crush. Ivy avoids making plans in case Ansel might be free, and she checks her text messages compulsively, willing his name to appear on the screen. Her productivity wanes — "The blizzard in her head made it difficult to work" — and her friendships suffer: "Years later, Ivy would flush with shame at the amount of time she had spent trying the patience of her friends, wanting them to reflect her hope rather than describing reality."

But doubtless the most significant emotional tug-of-war is between the pursuit of Ansel and motherhood. As a single mom, Ivy doesn't have the luxury of losing herself in her daydreams. There are school pickups to do, birthday cakes to bake, babysitters to book, chicken nuggets to reheat. There is an ex-husband in Virginia who needs to see their son, and the complicated dynamics of the ex's new relationship. And of course there are the fragile emotions of a young boy whose life has been upended by a decision that he had no control over.

For nearly a decade, Ivy's son has been the anchor in her world, the being around which she organizes her life, her thoughts, her plans. Slowly, after she meets Ansel, that focus begins to shift: "The concern she had for him when nearby altered when he was absent, into a slight increase in worry, as one would have in a spaceship, noticing the door ajar to the universe beyond." Perhaps for the first time since her son was born, Ivy is dipping her toe into that universe. Minot writes beautifully about what that looks like, about how Ivy begins to understand and accept her need for selfhood outside of motherhood.



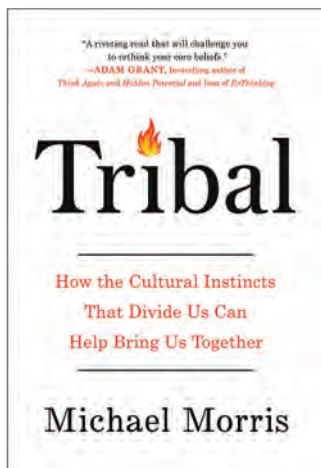
This is Minot's ninth book, her first in more than a decade. It's familiar territory for her; nearly all her work focuses on sex and relationships, on the intimate space between two people. But her books have matured as she has.



And here, Ivy's age — the season of her life — plays an important role. Most of her friends are settled into long marriages, something that Ivy had envisioned for herself, and Minot writes achingly about the unexpected place in which Ivy finds herself. Some of the most fraught passages in the book are not about Ansel but about Ivy's divorce — a detailed account of how she and her ex told their son about the separation is particularly wrenching — and the bewilderment of starting over again in middle age.

At fifty-two, Ivy is surprised by the intensity of her new urges, by the fact that she is still capable of desire and of being desired. The pain of being rejected by Ansel is different from the pain of her long divorce. In some sense, it's better. In this pain, there is hope.

— Rebecca Shapiro



Tribal

By Michael Morris (Thesis)

On the surface, the three events might seem entirely unrelated: an against-all-odds win by the South Korean national soccer team, a heroic effort to stabilize a Japanese nuclear-power plant, and the end of Prohibition in America. Michael Morris, a Columbia Business School professor and acclaimed psychologist, would disagree. They all came about, he argues, because of tribalism, a cultural dynamic that has in recent decades been chronically misunderstood.

While pundits deride tribalism as a force that has polarized communities, galvanized extremist movements, and ignited wars, Morris offers one of social science's most vilified buzzwords a reputational makeover. In *Tribal* he presents a series of global case studies — both historical and current — that show that tribalism can be an efficient engine of cultural change. In Morris's estimation, such collective human action can bridge divides and, yes, save lives. In fact, he argues, tribalism may be one of humanity's most underappreciated superpowers:



the very reason the human race has been able to thrive.

“To be sure, tribal psychology is part of the problem in many of today's conflicts,” he acknowledges in the book's introduction. “But it can also be part of the solution.”

To support his argument, Morris ushers readers through an engaging narrative that demystifies, without oversimplifying, complex concepts about the world of human instinct. He introduces three distinct ideas related to the ways humans are wired to behave and interact: the peer instinct, which encourages us to conform to what most people do; the hero instinct, which incites us to emulate those we admire; and the ancestor instinct, which inspires us to do as those have done before us. All three of these are tribal instincts, argues Morris: they bind people together in pursuit of goals that fellow members of their group would praise.

Of course, these instincts can lead us to act in ways that are immoral, but they can also be immensely powerful levers for progress. They can stabilize countries, companies, and communities by creating cohesion, understanding and tolerance.

“At a time of ethnic strife, pandemics and climate crisis, our human capacity

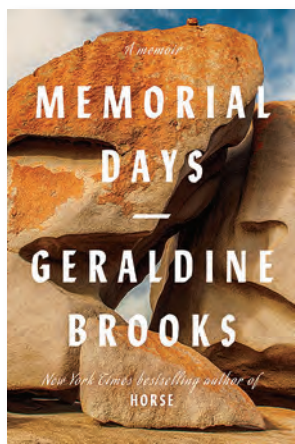
to act collectively is more important than ever,” Morris asserts. “Our tribal instincts are our greatest tool for group cooperation — we should not fear them but learn to harness them. They offer some hope to save us from ourselves.”

Against a backdrop of what can feel like jarring political change in the US and elsewhere, *Tribal*

serves as both a sobering explanation of how we got to where we are and a tool for navigating the future. Impressive in scope and engrossing in style and tone, it takes readers on a riveting journey into the human brain and through our evolutionary history. — Josie Cox '22BUS

Memorial Days

By Geraldine Brooks '83JRN (Viking)



J oan Didion once wrote that “grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.” We negotiate its geography without compass or map, on a journey that can take us through unexpected terrain.

For author Geraldine Brooks '83JRN, that difficult journey began on May 27, 2019, with a phone call notifying her that her husband, Tony Horwitz '83JRN, had collapsed and died on a Washington, DC, street. He was just sixty years old.

Horwitz and Brooks had been married for thirty-five years. They met in their first week of graduate studies at Columbia Journalism School, and Brooks still remembers their first kiss “beneath the unlovely footbridge over Amsterdam Avenue.” The couple enjoyed stellar careers as foreign correspondents for *The Wall Street Journal*, and both went on to write best-selling books. Each won a Pulitzer Prize, he for reporting, she for the novel *March*. They built a family, settled on Martha's Vineyard, and happily agreed to “devote themselves to watching sunsets” in their dotage.

Horwitz's sudden death obliterated that idyll, and *Memorial Days*, Brooks's heartbreaking new memoir, is an attempt not only to process her

profound loss but to reflect on our culture's diminishing ceremony around death and dying. Sadly, Brooks discovers that the blunt phone call from the doctor who announces Horwitz's death and then “can't get me off the phone fast enough” will be just the “first brutality” in a broken system.

Almost immediately, Brooks is thrown into a frenzy of activity and finds herself drowning in the “cruel bureaucracy of death.” The funeral must be planned, myriad administrative tasks completed, health insurance secured. Brooks needs to “scream, weep, throw myself on the floor, rend my garments, tear my hair. But I couldn't allow myself to do any of those things. Because I had to do so many other things.”



On top of all that, Brooks is in the middle of writing her 2022 novel *Horse*, and as she drags herself back to her writing desk to finish it, months and then years pass. Soon she realizes that she's spending all her energy tamping down her grief. “I have come to realize that my life since Tony's death has been one endless, exhausting performance. I have cast myself in a role: *woman being normal*.”

Brooks wants to give herself time and space for reflection, and so in February 2023 she leaves for a remote, undeveloped island off the coast of

Tasmania to do the real work of mourning. Here, alone in a rustic shack on a beach at the ends of the earth, she intends to “shut out the world and its demands. To remember my love and to feel the immensity of his loss.”

In *Memorial Days*, Brooks relives the trauma of her husband's death, “slowing it down, taking it in, and suffering it in the way I needed to suffer.” The book flips between memories of Horwitz and an account of her life on the island, where the wild, dramatic landscape provides a healing backdrop for her pain.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the psychiatrist whose book *On Death and Dying* outlined five stages of grief, has written that “our grief is as individual as our lives.” But though grief is personal, it is meant to be shared. Mourning rituals throughout history recognize that every loss needs to be witnessed and validated.

Brooks invites the reader to serve as that witness. She eulogizes Horwitz and wants us to understand the depth of her love, but she also asks us to learn from his passing. She bemoans the institutional busywork of death that serves to distract us from the real work of mourning. She wishes our culture permitted us to wallow in our grief instead of being “averse to sad.” She encourages bereaved readers to articulate their pain, to tell and retell it, and to “take control of this essential moment in the narrative of your life.”

Even in her vulnerability, Brooks proves a generous writer. She recounts the worst moment of her life and digs deep into the ugly details of her husband's death. She acknowledges that she will never reach the limits of her sorrow, but in *Memorial Days* her grief finds a purpose. She guides herself and the reader both to a new understanding of loss and a way to move forward. — Sally Lee

READING LIST

New and noteworthy releases

LIFEFORM

By Jenny Slate '04CC

The pandemic changed daily life for most people. But for comedian Jenny Slate, it brought another world-altering event: the birth of her daughter, Ida. In this zany essay collection — imbued with Slate's offbeat humor — she writes about the surreality of new parenthood in an already surreal time. While there is plenty of focus on the new member of her family, Slate does not lose sight of herself, or of her life outside motherhood. Rather, she writes, it's a story about "making a lifeform while being a lifeform."

THE SUN WON'T COME OUT TOMORROW

By Kristen Martin '16SOA

In American pop culture, the idea of orphanhood has long been romanticized. Orphans are plucky, adventurous, able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps (see *Little Orphan Annie* and *The Boxcar Children*). But for most orphans, the reality has been much darker. In her first book, Kristen Martin — herself a "full orphan," meaning that both her parents died when she was a child — traces the history of American orphanhood from the 1800s to the present. Her impeccably researched account is eye-opening and tragic, illuminating how religious extremism and racism, among other factors, determined the welfare of generations of children.

DOCTOR, WILL YOU PRAY FOR ME?

By Robert L. Klitzman

Religion and medicine have always been linked, but that relationship has grown complicated as our society has become increasingly divided along religious lines. In his latest book, Columbia psychiatrist and bioethicist Robert L. Klitzman explores the role of the chaplaincy in modern medicine, using his experience as both a doctor and a grieving family member to explain how spirituality can be an important part of healing and end-of-life decision-making. It's an important examination of an often overlooked aspect of the medical world.

SISTER SNAKE

By Amanda Lee Koe '17SOA

The ancient Chinese legend of two snakes who vow to be sisters forever, so when one wants to transform into a human, the other reluctantly agrees to do the same. In her darkly comic third novel, Amanda Lee Koe imagines what life would be like for these women more than a thousand years into immortality. Emerald's and Su's twenty-first-century worlds couldn't be more different: Su is the wealthy wife of a conservative politician in Singapore, while Emerald is partying her days away in Brooklyn. But an impulsive mistake brings the pair back together, and now Su has to keep Emerald from revealing their long-kept



secret. Koe deftly weaves together centuries of Chinese history and mythology with contemporary themes about race, gender, and sexuality, resulting in a fun read with plenty of substance.

HAVOC

By Christopher Bollen '98CC

In a luxury hotel just a bit past its prime, on the banks of the Nile, "long-term" Maggie Burkhardt is up to no good. Since the deaths of her husband and daughter six years ago, the eighty-one-year-old has been enjoying extended stays at various resorts, where she entertains herself by breaking up what she decides are bad marriages. But when a young American woman shows up in Egypt with her wily eight-year-old son, Maggie may have met her match. Christopher Bollen is a devotee of Agatha Christie, who spent a memorable period of her life writing psychological thrillers in a

grand Egyptian hotel, and his latest page-turner is a perfect tribute to her.

AMERICAN OASIS

By Kyle Paoletta '16SOA

The cities of the American Southwest — Albuquerque, Phoenix, Tucson, El Paso, and Las Vegas — are improbable success stories, rising out of America's hottest, driest desert region. Now populations are increasing across the area, but so are temperatures. What can we learn from these sun-soaked metropolises? In his impressive first book, journalist and Albuquerque native Kyle Paoletta offers a detailed history of the five cities, places with rich immigrant and Indigenous cultures, unique traditions, and stunning natural beauty. He also looks toward a future that will undoubtedly be affected by climate change. Both a love letter and a warning, it's a fascinating look at a complicated corner of our country.

Dangerous Consequences

In *Booster Shots*, pediatrician Adam Ratner '97PH, '97VPS grapples with the resurgence of measles and the anti-vax movement



Columbia Magazine: What motivated you to write a book about measles?

Adam Ratner: When a massive outbreak of measles hit New York City in 2018 and 2019, I was stunned to be dealing with a disease that we'd known how to prevent since the 1960s. Many of us trained in pediatrics had studied measles, but we'd never really *seen* it, much less treated it. I was alternately infuriated, depressed, and challenged by the whole situation. But also fascinated: I wanted to figure out how a disease that in 2000 had been declared eliminated in the US could have this incredible resurgence.

CM: You use a metric called R_0 to demonstrate how wildly contagious measles is. Can you explain?

AR: R_0 measures how many susceptible people one person with a disease will infect. With measles, one infected person will infect twelve to fourteen others, giving it an R_0 of twelve to fourteen. Compare that to polio, with an R_0 of about five, or flu, with an R_0 of two or three. The original version of COVID was also two to three. Measles is hands down the most contagious disease we know of.

CM: In 2018, New York's measles vaccination rate exceeded the CDC's

recommendation of 95 percent. Why, then, were there outbreaks?

AR: To truly prevent the spread of measles in a community, around 95 percent of the population needs to be vaccinated. In 2018, the percentage of kindergartners in New York City who were vaccinated appropriately hovered around 96 percent. But that high level was not evenly distributed. In some neighborhoods, the rate was close to 100 percent. Meanwhile, in Williamsburg and Borough Park, in Brooklyn, it was more like 60 percent. That's where the big outbreaks were.

CM: Your book charts the history of the measles vaccine, one of the twentieth century's great success stories. Today's biggest story is the anti-vax movement. How did that happen?

AR: Early vaccine hesitancy mostly centered on pockets of resistance to the DTP vaccine, which covers diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis. The shift in focus to the MMR vaccine, which bundles measles, mumps, and rubella, got a big push in 1998, when a doctor named Andrew Wakefield published an article in the British medical journal *The Lancet* that hypothesized that children who received the MMR vaccine were more likely to develop autism. Its convoluted reasoning had to do with the way the viruses from the vaccine replicated in the intestine. The article was fraudulent, unethical, and wrong, and *The Lancet* later retracted it. Wakefield lost his medical license, but his baseless claims have had enormous staying power. With autism rates on the rise, worried parents were desperate for explanations, and Wakefield supplied an easy one.

CM: Can some of the resistance to the measles vaccine in particular be due

to the still-prevalent misconception that measles — unlike polio, say — is a relatively mild childhood disease?

AR: Yes, kids used to get measles all the time, because it's incredibly contagious and there was no vaccine. But the disease is not always mild: millions of those kids got extremely sick, and far too many died and still do — in places where access to vaccines can be difficult. Many modern parents don't realize how serious it is, because they grew up in a time of near-universal vaccination and have never experienced measles firsthand. The very success of the vaccine in wiping out measles has resulted in a collective amnesia about its dangers.

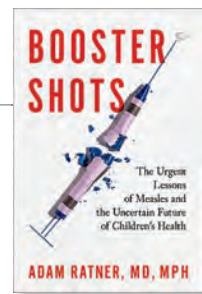
CM: You note in the book that the anti-vax movement presaged the resistance to the COVID vaccine during the pandemic. Did you see that coming?

AR: No. I was naive enough to believe that everyone would rally around it. I thought, "This will be the end of the anti-vaccine movement, because people will see that this vaccine saved us." I failed to anticipate the politicizing of what should have been a shared goal of public health.

CM: The recent US election has raised the possibility that Robert F. Kennedy Jr., perhaps the measles vaccine's most outspoken opponent, will have a position in the new administration. What's your view on that?

AR: It is very discouraging. Somehow, children's health has become politicized. I've spent my career taking care of sick children and trying to prevent children from getting sick. That is not, and should not be, a partisan issue. All parents want their kids to be healthy. No one is on Team Disease here.

— Lorraine Glennon



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The Alum Who Invented Eustace Tilley

Corey Ford 1923CC and the birth of *The New Yorker*

Harold Ross, an editor at the satirical magazine *Judge*, wanted to start his own humor weekly. He knew all the wits and wags of 1920s New York and was able to wangle from them a small bundle of parodies, reviews, cartoons, and gossip. What he needed next was a cover. His art editor, Rea Irvin, rendered an image based on an engraving of a nineteenth-century French dandy: a man in an absurdly high collar and black top hat, applying his monocle to a butterfly. Ross approved, and on February 21, 1925, the first edition of *The New Yorker* hit the stands, thirty-two pages of highbrow drollery bound by two staples.

Sales were slow in the first few months, and there were holes in the book where ads should have been. To plug the gaps, Ross turned to Corey Ford 1923CC, a young parodist and *New Yorker* contributor. Ford's task was to divulge, over the course of twenty issues, the secrets of *The New Yorker's* elaborate production process.

Ford's column, titled "The Making of a Magazine," was the perfect showcase for his powers of farcical invention. He identified the top-hatted man on the cover of the first edition as one Eustace Tilley, the ubiquitous genius of the sprawling *New Yorker* empire.

Among his countless duties, Mr. Tilley was field supervisor of the magazine's twenty-nine-million-acre paper forest; general manager of squid ticklers (tickling being the method by which ink for the magazine was extracted from moody cephalopods in *The New Yorker's* deep-sea squid farm); and, not least, general manager of circulation morale. Ford further revealed that the first issue of *The New Yorker* was "printed in pencil in 1847" and that Mr. Tilley, in 1893, wanting to build a village for the magazine's thousands of employees, purchased Manhattan Island. "After some thought," Ford writes, "Mr. Tilley decided to call it New York, a clever combination of the first seven letters of the name of this magazine."

Ford's path to *The New Yorker* ran straight through Morningside Heights. A *New Yorker* himself, Ford entered

Columbia in 1919, on the brink of a decade awash in "smart" magazines, bathtub gin, and the ripostes of the Algonquin Round Table. In his sophomore year, he became editor of the *Jester*, the undergrad humor mag, in which he promptly established his iconoclasm by calling President Nicholas Murray Butler 1882CC, 1884GSAS "a jackass." As a senior, he wrote the book and lyrics for the 1923 Varsity Show, *Half Moon Inn*. That same year, when the Alumni Federation (now the CAA) offered a prize for a Columbia fight song, Ford reworked the lyrics of the show's final chorus. His winning entry, "Roar, Lion, Roar," is sung on campus to this day.

For a young writer seeking his fortune in the big city, the Roaring Twenties were magical. Ford went to plays and parties and picture shows, wrote bits and books, and trawled

the newsstands for the latest gems from Ring Lardner, Robert Benchley, and Dorothy Parker. And when the roar had died down and the hangover began, Ford kept typing. Through the 1930s and '40s, he wrote for *Vanity Fair*, *Collier's*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* and became increasingly devoted to outdoor life. In 1952 he moved to the woods of Hanover, New Hampshire, where he wrote a regular column for *Field & Stream* about a group of fictional Vermont sportsmen.

In the end, Ford authored some thirty books and more

than five hundred magazine pieces. But he saved his best for last: shortly after his death in 1969, at age sixty-seven, *Field & Stream* published Ford's masterpiece — not a playful nugget of urbane satire but a plaintive, poignant short story called "The Road to Tinkhamtown," about a dying man and his beloved hunting dog.

Like Eustace Tilley, Ford was a lifelong bachelor. He had no children, save perhaps for Mr. Tilley, who, along with *The New Yorker*, turns one hundred in February. Time hasn't slowed him. The squid farm may have dried up, and top hats may not yet have returned to fashion, but Mr. Tilley, or a variation on him, still appears each year on the cover of the magazine's anniversary issue. Happy birthday, sir.

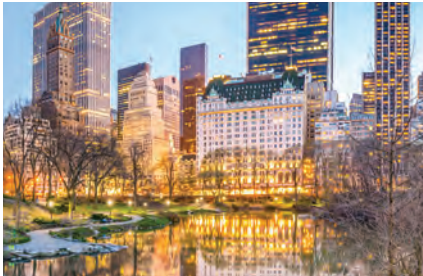
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